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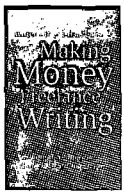

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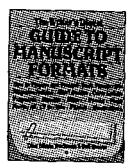

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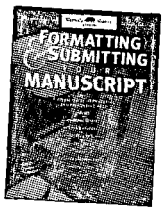

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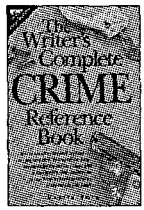

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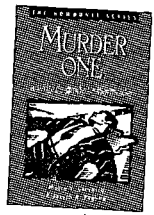

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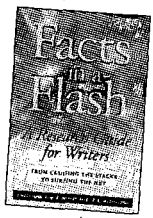

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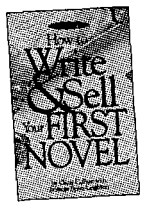

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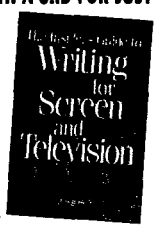

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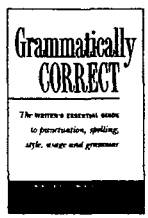

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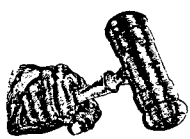

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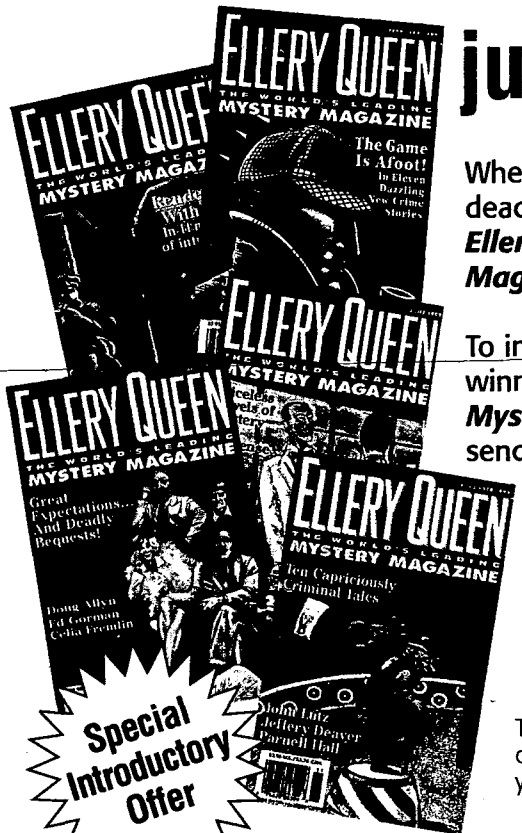

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MURDER, 'ORRIBLE MURDER

by Amy Myers

"Murder, 'orrible murder!" Ned came shrieking up the steps to the humble palace we call home. "That's what the gaff's board says is playing tonight. Oh, let's go, Gov, *please.*"

Well, the board was right. It *was* murder, a murder most foul, though we expected it to be on the stage, where the corpse could leap up to take a bow. The poor corpse we were to see that night lay stiff and silent forever.

Let me introduce myself. Tom Wasp, master chimney sweep, at your service. Sweeps aren't usually theatre-visiting folk. Our clothes, skin, and faces are too black from the soot belched down by the great chimneys of London town for us to be welcome *anywhere* save with our own kind. I've even seen matelots in the filthiest pubs in Limehouse inch away when we come in. We have a smell all our own, which we don't notice save when folks move

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away from us. Take no notice, Ned, I tell him then. Pretend we're Moses going through the Red Sea.

It was Ned's birthday that day. He's my sweep's chummy, apprenticed to me these last four years since he was seven. It isn't his real birthday, of course, just the day we set aside for it, owing to the fact that when I rescued him from being the Walworth Terror's climbing boy, he was an anybody's child of the streets.

"Which gaff?" I asked, playing for time, although it hardly mattered. They're all dens of iniquity round where we live, which is in the east of Her Majesty's great capital, halfway between the rookeries of Bethnal Green and the heaving evils of dockland. The entrance fee to gaffs in this year of 1862 is one penny, and seventeen is usually the maximum age of the audience, if that's the right word for those come to boo, cheer, and vilify the actors. Not that that's the main business of their evening, although they can be moved to tears by a fine drama. Their chief purpose is to plan future villainies in between wapping with their girls.

Amy Myers last appeared in *EQMM* with an historical tale starring her series sleuth Auguste Didier, a master chef. This month she introduces us to a new character with an even more unusual occupation: Victorian chimney sweep. The first mystery novel featuring London sweep Tom Wasp has just been published in Germany and may soon be available in the U.K. ‡

"The Ratcliffe Playhouse, Gov." Seeing my face fall, as this particular gaff is right in the heart of the most notorious stretch of the Ratcliffe Highway in dockland, Ned quickly added: "It's playing *Hamlet, of the Prince of Denmark*. Hamlet's the landlord of the old pub you told me about."

I didn't think Ned had got this quite right, though it's true that Wilton's Music Hall was once called The Prince of Denmark, owing to the fact that its neighbourhood in Wellclose Square was a haunt of Danish sailors. Being older than Ned, however, I was of the impression *Hamlet* was a play by Mr. Shakespeare. That gentleman must be dead by now, because he was famous when I was a nipper in the 'thirties, but doubtless he drank in the pub and took his ideas from there, so maybe both Ned and I were right.

"Very well, Ned," I agreed good-humouredly, taking six pennies from our savings jar. "We can buy a nice mutton pie from Mrs. Piggs's pie shop on the way home to round off the evening. But it had better be a really 'orrible murder or you're in trouble."

I meant this as a joke, but old Satan's ears must have been flap-

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ping, and he doesn't understand humour. Ned does. He roared with laughter.

We weren't laughing by the end of that evening, for a drama that the great London public never saw ended in a vile murder which to describe in its true horror would have halted the pen of Mr. Shakespeare himself.

We joined the mob waiting outside for entrance to the first performance of the evening, and as usual my adult sooty face stood out like a chimney pot in moonlight. They don't like strangers here, they don't like sweeps, and they don't like anyone over eighteen or so. The Ratcliffe Playhouse, next to the Seven Tars Tavern, is an old warehouse disused these twenty years until taken over for the cultural purposes of the gaff. Once, I heard said, the tavern was a respectable house called the Seven Stars, until it lost both respect and its "S." They've even given the Highway a new name now, in an attempt to make it smell the sweeter, after the hideous murders that took place here fifty years ago, not to mention all those that have happened since. What good could come of that? I might name myself Good Queen Bess, but I'd still be a chimney sweep, and so the Highway remains all bright jets of gaslight within the dens and festering darkness outside. Even its few gas lamps are ashamed to glow bright.

"The String of Pearls, Sweeney Todd, the Fiend of Fleet Street," I read from the bill when we arrived. This drama was to be followed by a comic ballad of "Neddy, Prince of Wales," and last came *Hamlet.* You get your money's worth at a gaff, two whole dramas and a song in fifty minutes of entertainment, all for a penny.

The noise of the mob was increasing every minute, and a sudden downpour of rain increased it even quicker. Caps were pulled down, collars up, and bonneted girls nestled closer for shelter. Not to me, of course. Rain bounced off the hard edge of my stove hat, and took a fancy for a dive down the back of my neck, a most uncomfortable procedure. I do my duty by water more than most sweeps by taking a threepenny dip at the Whitechapel public baths once a month at least, sometimes twice. In between I don't fancy it, so I was most grateful when an odd-looking cove, lean of face and figure, with ancient black frockcoat, trousers, and hat, emerged from the entrance door and shouted: "Regulars, this way."

"Who's that bloke?" Ned asked the young villain next to him, as the great surge began to follow the cove, not into the gaff, but down the basement steps.

"Mr. Montague Perks. Owns this dive." The villain eyed Ned and then me in a most interested fashion, and I clutched Ned by the arm, for young chummies are much appreciated by the scum burglars of London for extra work by night, shinning in small windows and between bars. Ned is old for them, but his dipping skills

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into the pockets of the unwary are still regrettably highly polished, for all I point out that Our Good Lord has his eye firmly on him—even at night. He needs no encouragement from gangs of young villains.

Regulars, it appeared, were allowed to shelter from the rain in the large semi-cellar under the gaff floor and stage. It was divided in two with a door into the far room, and after Ned was swept from me in the mob's rush, I found myself jammed up against the wall by this open door.

I promptly lost interest in Villainous Young London, for it was in the far room under the stage that the drama seemed to be going on. Now I know you're wondering—just like all playgoers—when you're going to hear about the real murder we saw that night, to which my answer is that you can't sweep a chimney from halfway up; you have to clear the soot first. This drama in the cellar was part of the soot that my memory fortunately collected into its soot-bag and shook out later. For it was to result in murder.

A young lad was standing on a wagon full of straw and cushions underneath what must have been the stage, his head jammed to one side by the floor above him as he struggled with huge bolts on a trap door. Leaning against the wall behind the wagon was what looked like a painted piece of scenery, attached to a pulley with ropes, so I guessed he was the stagehand. The lad couldn't have been more than fourteen, and was most dedicated to his job, it seemed, as he took no notice at all of the chaos around him, as two ladies and three gentlemen changed clothes, gathered props, and painted their faces, all the while shouting at each other most viciously. Garments and insults were flying through the air like bad potatoes at Spitalfields.

"You keep your hands off Mr. Atkins, you haybag," the older lady was shouting, while busily pummelling the younger woman, who was scrawny and vicious-looking. The assailant, whom I took to be Mrs. Atkins, was of much wider girth, made wider by a lopsided crinoline; her face was reddish though not unattractive, were it not for the huge curly black wig topped by a dirty mob cap. Her opponent must have had some charm somewhere, for the young, somewhat intense-looking man swiftly came to her defence, crying, "You leave Annie alone," and freeing his beloved from attack. Despite his sex, this was by no means simple, for Mrs. Atkins had powerful muscles in her flailing arms. He received no gratitude.

"Get out of the way, Matthew, and you can shut your face, you old judy. Jasper's going to marry me." Young Annie flung herself affectionately on the centre of the argument, who I'd noticed was doing his best to hide behind the wagon. Mr. Jasper Atkins, though a well-favoured man, was obviously over-fond of his vittles and ale, judging by his belly. He looked mightily embarrassed as

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the young lady's clutching arms retrieved him from his safe position and enfolded him. Not for long. Mrs. Atkins promptly tore her rival away, flinging her back to young Matthew.

"My dear Annie," Jasper said most haughtily, seeing where his best chance of survival lay, "may I point out that I am married already, to my delightful wife here. Margery, my dear—"

"Don't you give me that 'Margery, my dear,' you old lecher. I know you've been wapping her." Margery suddenly found herself heavily involved in further pugnacious struggles with Annie, in which her huge crinoline gave her a distinct advantage.

"He loves me," wailed Annie, "doesn't he, Matthew?"

This Matthew must have been a most tolerant—or desperate—sweetheart, for he not only rescued her once more, but fervently cried, "Who could not? You are an angel."

Thus reassured, Annie swung round to Jasper Atkins once more, and announced sweetly: "You said you'd marry me when the old girl was dead."

Now this was a brushful of soot in the face all right, I thought.

Jasper went white. "You lie," he roared, retreating nervously as Margery screeched her fury and advanced towards him. It seemed to me all too possible that Annie was telling the truth, for guilt was written on his face, as clear as the Ten Commandments on Moses' tablets.

"Planning to do me in, were you?" In came Margery with a right to the side of the face, and Jasper went staggering backwards. That was a possibility that hadn't occurred to me; Jasper looked as if he would be capable of murdering anyone at the moment, though it seemed to me that Annie had more cause for revenge.

"Two can play at that game," Margery yelled at him, following up her attack with a left.

"On with your work, I pray you." Mr. Perks, attracted by the noise, pushed past me into the room, moaning piteously, as he no doubt feared his cast being decimated before they even reached the stage.

Margery ignored him, and I saw, to my alarm, that she had decided to swoon. Fortunately, the other gentleman, who had hitherto remained out of the conflict, caught her. Margery opened one eye from her semi-recumbent position in his arms:

"Daniel, kill him. Avenge me!"

At this point I had a moment's doubt. Perhaps this was the play, after all, for there seemed as many murders promised here as ever I had seen on a gaff stage. If it were not a play, then the Highway might soon be living up to its old reputation.

"And you kill him too, Matthew," Annie shrieked. "Avenge me. I lost my honour to him, I did."

Matthew went white, whether at the revelation of his beloved's

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slip from grace or at the thought of fisticuffs with Jasper. "You dog, Jasper," was all he managed, and Daniel managed even less, since he was trying to cope with a sobbing and heaving Margery.

"Perks," roared Jasper Atkins, "dismiss this young man immediately."

Matthew was terror-stricken. "You can't do that! I haven't done anything."

"You, sir, have insulted me. Dismiss him, Perks."

"After the performance, I pray you." Montague Perks was a gentleman on whom it occurred to me Mr. Dickens might have modelled his Uriah Heep. (The local patterer had done good trade in acquainting me with the doings of David Copperfield.) "How can you appear as Hamlet without a Claudius?"

This appeal to Jasper's vanity struck me as a most cunning strategy. I was beginning to see more in Mr. Perks than met the ear.

"I could do it," volunteered the young stagehand eagerly, entering the fray with hope of his own advancement.

"Oh, no, you can't," Matthew shouted immediately, rushing to Perks in appeal. Unfortunately, he let go of Annie in the process, which caused more shrieks.

"I can." The young man leapt from the top of the wagon, either to display his talents or defend his person, but unfortunately he landed on the now recumbent Jasper Atkins, who had been floored in a fresh attack by Margery, and then fell flat on his face.

"Dismiss this young man instantly," Jasper groaned, staggering to his feet, with a vicious kick at his assailant.

Mr. Perks wrung his hands in despair. "I need his services, Jasper."

"*Instantly!*" It seemed to me Jasper's pride was hurt more than his belly.

"Joe, you are dismissed," Perks hastily agreed. "Out!" He pointed the downcast stagehand to the outside door, perhaps in the hope that Jasper would forget about Matthew. Joe trailed miserably past me.

I was surprised how much power this Mr. Atkins wielded, in view of the fact that Perks was the owner. Here he was being threatened by most of the cast, and clearly with good reason, and yet Perks deferred to his every whim. He must be a splendid actor for Perks to fear his loss.

"Who's going to see to the scenery and trap door now Joe's gone?" Daniel asked nervously. He was now released from the precious (or otherwise) burden of Margery, and seemed disposed to return to practicalities, as befitted a grey-haired gentleman of middle years and sober deportment.

"I'll have to," Perks replied despondently. "I'll look after the

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scenery pulley from upstairs, and I'll close the trap after Annie has drowned herself and Jasper—"

"Pity she doesn't do it for good," Margery yelled, "and take you with her, husband dear."

Husband dear responded with a cuff on her jaw, and seeing she had an audience, Margery decided on the ladylike response.

"Daniel!" she roared.

He cleared his throat and muttered feebly: "Don't do that, Jasper."

A relieved Jasper turned to Perks. "Dismiss this man *instantly!*"

"After the show—" Perks gabbled, "—if you please, sir," he added in his best Uriah Heep manner.

"Now!" Jasper roared. "He's been fiddling with my wife."

"You lie," Daniel cried, clearly terrified, as Perks seemed about to obey Jasper's command after this shocking revelation.

"He doesn't," shrieked Margery. "I told you to kill him, Daniel. Do it!"

I was getting very gripped by this drama, which seemed to have the seeds of several plots in it: revenge, lust for possession—and ambition. I had by now come to the conclusion it must be what they called a rehearsal, a run-through of the emotions to be displayed on stage. It had had to me, as will be obvious, its humorous side, and as such I could not take it seriously.

At least, not then. Later, I was to realise I'd been much mistaken not to do so.

At this point, Mr. Perks consulted his pocket watch and called, "Time," and with a final, menacing "I'll see you afterwards, Perks," Jasper Atkins strode to the steps leading to the stage. The rest of the cast trailed after him, and the mob behind me rushed for the outer door. I saw, to my concern, that Ned had got very pal-y with one group of young villains, and I made my way over, receiving an evil look for my pains, though not from Ned.

The mob scrambled to get the best seats in the house, which were considered by those in the prime of life to be in the gallery. Needless to say, Ned and I were left behind in the great charge through the entrance door, but this did not worry us, as only ladders were provided to reach the gallery. These would defeat my bowed legs, and Ned has enough of ladders during the day, so we sat in happy state below on the boxes and barrels referred to as seats.

"What were your pals in the cellar up to, Ned?" I asked him. When he said nothing, I fixed him with a stern look, fearing the worst—and hearing it.

"Dipping gang," he muttered at last. "The Rats, they call themselves, under their gov, the Ratcatcher."

"And was you thinking of joining them?"

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"No, Gov." Oh, he did sound virtuous, but I believed him, not because of matters of good and evil, but because Ned likes to be independent.

"They're scared of this Ratcatcher," he then volunteered. "One of them was found dead in Nightingale Lane a week or two ago."

It sounded bad to me. "You did right, Ned. That pie will taste all the better on our way home, now it's been blest with a bit of good sense."

The soot in the chimney was beginning to loosen, and events were moving on. We were about to see murder done, though we had been looking forward to Sweeney Todd and Hamlet as the murderers, not to having to take a part in the action ourselves.

A curtain made of sacking was drawn back to reveal a scene with a house painted on it, which I recognised as having been in the cellar. Indeed, I could still see Mr. Perks standing by the pulley on the stage, only half hidden by sacking side-cloths. In a chair on stage leered Jasper Atkins, wielding a razor.

"Sweeney Todd," announced Perks, popping his head round the sacking, in case we were in any doubt as to whether this were *Hamlet.* We weren't, for *The String of Pearls* had been a well-known drama this twenty year or so, and any pie shop foolish enough to trade in Fleet Street has long since closed down.

Young Matthew, looking very nervous, came onto the stage and announced he wanted a nice shave. He was clutching a box on which was written *Pearls.* "Aha," says Sweeney/Jasper to the audience, "I want them." He stamped on the floor, saying, "A fine cut, sir," and the chair tipped Matthew (obviously relieved to be away from the razor) into an open trap. Sweeney disappeared, to come back with a string of pearls. "Dead meat," he chortled, while we all hissed this vile murderer. Then Margery tripped onto the stage, announcing she was Mrs. Lovett and was looking for dead meat for her pies. More hisses. She disappeared, and another customer came in, who followed the same path to the cellar. While Mrs. Lovett was showing us the big pie she had baked, with many meaningful glances, another customer entered, and then another, for a shave and despatch to the cellar. Ned was highly amused to see that all the customers, bar the first, were the same gentleman, Daniel, with different coloured beards on. Then Annie came on to bewail the loss of her sweetheart, young Matthew, who turned up in a white sheet to tell us he's a ghost. Daniel (beardless) then arrived as her father, and pretended to eat Mrs. Lovett's pie, in which there was a large chunk of Matthew's shirt.

Scream, shock, shouts from stage and audience, until Sweeney/Jasper got what he deserved and Matthew came on with a constable's hat, a bludgeon, and a rattle to see justice was done.

After this excitement, Mr. Perks, who must have been manning

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the trap down below, since the scenery remained the same, entertained us with his comic song about the Prince of Wales. To my surprise, this piece of villainy was well received by the audience, though as a rule such songs don't go down well in this patriotic part of London. He then retreated to the pulley at the back of the stage, as at last we came to *Hamlet.* A new backcloth was to be seen of a castle, which was just as well as Hamlet would not look princelike in Sweeney Todd's barber's shop.

"*Hamlet!*" bawled Perks from the side of the stage, only half hidden by a screen.

Mrs. Lovett (Margery again, with a bit of muslin over her face) ran on stage to tell us that now she was to marry Claud, whose brother, her husband the King of Denmark, had conveniently died last week. Here was her son Hamlet, she informed us, and on strolled Jasper wearing a black cloak over his trousers, so you could tell he was the villain again. It was a pity Jasper looked a good deal older than young Matthew playing Claud, who was Hamlet's step-papa.

"You'll have to make do with the leftovers from the funeral for your wedding nose-bag," Hamlet yelled cruelly at his mother, who was called Gertrude.

"Oh, Hamlet, you don't understand," she wailed and ran off.

Then Sweeney Todd's customer (Daniel) rushed on clad in the long grey beard and white sheet Matthew had worn earlier. He got a round of applause as he shouted at his son Hamlet, "I am the ghost of your father. That bloke—" he pointed at Claud/Matthew, who was doing a spot of fiddling with Gertrude/Margery, "—murdered me."

Well, naturally, neither Ghost/Daniel nor Hamlet/Jasper liked this, and Hamlet staggered round the stage shouting, "Shall I kill him now or later?"

This was a silly question to ask a penny gaff audience. They yelled the answer with one voice: "*Now!*"

He didn't listen to them, though, since Annie, who told us she was called Ophelia, rushed onto the stage towards Jasper as though she was about to clock him one. He caught her, though, and had a good squeeze, to the hisses of the audience. I waited eagerly to see the young hero leap on stage, whoever it was, to rescue her, but no such gentleman appeared.

"When are you going to marry me?" shouted Ophelia.

"I've got to kill Claud first," Hamlet explained.

"I'll tell my father," said Ophelia crossly. On came Matthew again; this time he wore a long beard, indicating he was not Claud but someone else, so the audience treated him as the hero and cheered.

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"I'll give him what for, daughter," said Matthew, so apparently he was Ophelia's father.

"Oh no, you won't." Hamlet ran his sword under her father's arm and he promptly fell down dead.

There were roars of disapproval at this villainy, and two young chaps in the audience were so incensed they rushed onto the stage to arrest him, calling for the late constable from *Sweeney Todd,* regardless of the fact that he was now lying dead at their feet. Hamlet ran away offstage, and a gentlemen called Lurty (Daniel) appeared, announcing he was Matthew's/Ophelia's father's son. Ophelia announced she was going to drown herself and jumped into the open trapdoor. I thought this rather strange, since the scenery suggested we were still inside the castle, which was unlikely to have a river flowing through. Her head remained sticking up for a minute or two and then disappeared.

Ophelia's father then arose from the dead and walked off stage, while Mr. Perks, in his frock coat and battered top hat, heaved at the scenery pulley ropes. The castle disappeared and up came a nice stretch of water and country land. Mr. Perks's back could be seen as he gazed at it admiringly from the side of the stage where four members of the cast were half-hidden. Daniel then made a brief appearance wearing the ghost's grey beard, and declared he was a gravedigger.

On comes the villain, Hamlet/Jasper. *Hiss, hiss* from the audience. "What's this?" Hamlet cries, seeing the open trap. "Miss Ophelia's grave," he's told by the gravedigger, who then backs quickly behind the screen for a quick change of waistcoat and removal of beard. Out comes gravedigger/Daniel again, and says to Hamlet, "I'm Lurty, Ophelia's brother, who the devil are you?" I supposed Daniel could not play both Ophelia's father and her brother, but nevertheless it was a pity that Daniel's acting did not convince me he was young Matthew's son. However, we all cheered him as hero, and booed Hamlet, as they set to with their daggers.

But then it happened!

Jasper Atkins, waving his dagger menacingly, leapt in splendid fashion into the river—sorry, the open grave of Ophelia—crying, "It is I, Hamlet the Dane."

We realised Lurty's dagger must have struck home, for Jasper's head didn't stick up like Ophelia's; he gave a most realistic howl, and there followed a loud thump to indicate Lurty had won. Well, the audience, Ned and I included, assuming this was the end of the play, all cheered enthusiastically at the death of this villain Hamlet, who had received his just deserts.

I was most surprised, therefore, when Mr. Perks didn't come forward to close the curtain; instead he and the four actors on stage all came to stare down into the grave.

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"What are they doing that for?" Ned whispered.

"It's a tasteful sort of bow for the end of the show." I didn't like to say I didn't know, and an uneasy sort of feeling came over me like it does when I've swept my last flue only to find myself alone in the building. Where's my threepence coming from? Or, in this case, that there might be a nasty surprise awaiting us.

Ned considered this, but just as he delivered his verdict: "Nah! That Hamlet bloke's done himself in," there was a shriek from Montague Perks, who rushed for the steps down to the cellar.

"He's dead!" Margery screamed, as befitted a mother's grief at seeing her Hamlet's corpse, however dastardly a murderer he was.

"Good job, too!" yelled the audience (except for me and Ned). More frantic applause.

Annie was clutching Matthew. "The wagon's gone," she yelled. "He *is* dead."

"You've got the constable there," roared a wit, meaning Matthew, who appeared as one in the earlier drama.

"Yes," moaned Margery. "Go and look at him, Matthew."

"I'm not a bloody pigman," Matthew cried nervously, to the delight of the audience.

"Oh yes, you are," a hundred voices shouted back, still hovering between playacting and truth.

Seeing the actors were incapable of movement, and being the only adult in the audience, I reluctantly left Ned and went up to see what was happening, for this was a most unusual ending for a play, and it seemed my forebodings might have been justified. I had in mind just to draw the sacking curtain as if nothing was wrong, so the audience wouldn't realise what was happening.

But there *was* something wrong. The four actors were reluctantly going down the steps to the cellar, and after I'd drawn the sacking across I looked down into the pit myself. Mr. Perks had been bent over the unfortunate Hamlet/Jasper, lying crumpled on his stomach on the cellar floor twelve feet below, and stood up as the four actors came over to him.

"He fell on his dagger." Montague Perks's hands were wrung once again. "A terrible accident. Who moved the wagon? Where is that wretched boy?"

"You dismissed him," Margery sobbed, staring in horror at the corpse of her husband.

As all five gathered round the body, I could see the blood trickling over the floor. When you see a real corpse, the drama evaporates, and the pathos of life is laid bare. I said a quick prayer for his soul, but the Lord pointed out to me that Jasper Atkins *might* not yet be dead, and shouldn't I take a look? I was far from happy at this unpleasant mission, but I obediently walked down the stone steps to the cellar.

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The wagon was now between one end of the open trapdoor and the steps. It occurred to me that it was unlikely to have moved through accident, but a human hand could move it easily enough, even a woman's, for a rope had been tied round both shafts; ends were trailing on the floor. Round about this cellar room was the paraphernalia of the performance, and on a table by the steps were the pie and other accessories from the Sweeney Todd play. It all looked so innocent, and perhaps it was. But had that human hand moved the wagon by mistake or deliberately?

No one seemed to think it strange that a chimney sweep had joined them; they were all too busy with the new drama. Shock has strange effects, and Margery seemed set on the biggest performance of her life; she was about to clasp the lifeless body of her husband in her arms, until she saw the blood, rapidly changed her mind, and backed away. I took her place.

"He fell on his dagger," Perks observed to me gravely. "I told him not to carry a real one."

"He fell on his dagger," Annie repeated to Matthew, deciding to have a few hysterics thereafter.

"On his dagger," Daniel repeated even more gravely, though Matthew, coming to his turn for the dagger speech, decided more obvious grief was suitable and mopped his eyes with Claud's cloak. Such splendid players were they I would have thought Mr. Jasper was the most popular man in this city. However, the memory of all five being threatened by Jasper before the show was too vivid for that. Far from the most popular man, he seemed to have had some hold over his wife and fellow actors, as if he were the famous Dr. Mesmer himself. Even Montague Perks had scuttled to do his bidding quickly, and Jasper's parting words, "I'll see you afterwards, Perks," took on a sombre significance. There had been no afterwards.

I had been doing my best to find some of the blessed breath of life, or a heartbeat, but there was neither. I turned the late Jasper Atkins over with some difficulty; his chest was stained red, and the dagger lay some foot or so away. There was one strange thing I decided not to comment on. The dagger had no blood on it, yet there was a deep wound on his chest.

"You should call a policeman," I said formally and quietly to Mr. Perks, knowing the right way of things, but not wishing to alarm.

He gazed at me as if I'd suggested sending for Her Gracious Majesty herself. "*Crushers?* Here? This is a respectable house."

"There'll have to be an inquest," I said firmly, though hazy as to my facts.

"For a mere accident?" Perks asked most piteously.

"That's for the coroner's jury to decide." I sounded so important to myself, I felt I was playing a part myself.

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"What else could they decide?" Daniel squealed, having overheard my remarks. "Suicide?"

"It's a strange way to do it," Matthew observed.

"He had no cause for suicide," Margery snapped. "He was the most delightful of husbands and we were as happy as two lovebirds."

"Says you," Annie sneered.

"I am *bereaved.*" Margery glared at her. "No husband of mine would commit suicide."

"Was there cause for murder?" I asked soberly. I was aware that Ned had suddenly appeared at my side, white-faced as he looked at the corpse.

Margery screamed at the mere mention of the word, Annie wailed, Perks moaned, Daniel went very white, Matthew appeared to be choking, and Ned clutched my hand. Daniel recovered first.

"Out of the question," he informed me loftily. "How could anyone be sure he would fall on his dagger? And a fall alone would be a most uncertain method to kill anyone."

"That's true," I agreed. "But if I were on that coroner's jury, I'd want to know who moved that wagon out of the way. That doesn't look very accidental to me." I saw the shock on all their faces, rapidly wiped off by consideration of their individual positions.

"You?" Margery suddenly realised she'd been demeaning herself by talking to a sweep. "Who asked *you?*"

"I am the hand of God." I was getting into the way of speaking grandly, and indeed, up on the roofs of London, above the toil and torment, it is easy to think of oneself as a tiny instrument for the Lord's bidding to be done.

Annie tried a snigger, but the others backed away as though I were indeed an angelic visitation. I hoped I could keep this up, for thereby I might quickly discover the truth of this terrible event.

Montague Perks was the first to give his opinion. "It was an accident. The wheels slipped. Oil spill from the lamps, perhaps." All five of them rushed over to the wagon to investigate the possibilities.

"Ned," I said quickly, taking advantage of their distraction, "Out with you. Check that outer door is still bolted, unbolt it, go out, and find a crusher. Ask him to spring his rattle and come in himself."

This mission was not to his liking, but he knows when I use a certain voice that I'm the gov. Even so, he didn't go immediately—there was something preying on his mind, and at last out it popped.

"Gov, be careful."

"Me?" I was surprised. What should I have to fear?

"I think that bloke's the Ratcatcher." Ned was pointing at Mon-

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tague Perks, and though I was dumbfounded, I knew that if Ned said something, he always had reason. I bore his words most carefully in mind as he set off on his mission, though Perks's Uriah Heep attitude to Jasper Atkins hardly suggested he was King of the Dipping Gangs. Unless, of course, Jasper Atkins knew about his little secret, just as he knew about Margery and Daniel. Uriah Heep was, after all, a hypocrite, and Perks's real nature might be quite different. In that case, there was one more to be added to those who had cause to push that wagon away.

Meanwhile, despite their endeavours, not one of the five had managed to prove that that wagon could move on its own accord.

"It was pushed," Perks now decided. "Joe crept back and took his revenge."

Now there was a word they *all* liked. A dismissed stage assistant would be a most suitable decoy from the truth.

"Revenge," they chorused in relief.

"He couldn't creep through a bolted door," I had pleasure in reminding them.

"Then the wagon was moved by mistake," said Matthew belligerently, "in the belief it was no longer needed."

Margery swelled into her own again. "No mistake. It *was* you,"she shrieked at Annie. "After you'd jumped into the river, you moved the wagon away so poor Jasper *died* when he leapt into the grave. It had to be you. You were the only one down there." She burst into loud sobs, but no one took notice. "It was your revenge on him, you trollop."

"No, it wasn't," Annie yelled in alarm. "I went straight up after I was drowned. I was to be court lady next scene, wasn't I?"

"Who says?" sneered Margery. "Anyone see her?"

"I did," Matthew said nobly, though it was clear no one believed him.

"She had time to push the wagon aside, though." Margery stuck to the attack belligerently.

"So did you," Matthew whipped back at her. "Any of us could have slipped down the stairs while we were watching behind that screen."

"Me?" The bosom swelled. "I adored Jasper, light of my life." She decided on a swoon once more into Daniel's arms. The drama was off again.

"How dare you, sir?" Daniel galloped fiercely to the defence of his lady. "You, who threatened his life!"

"What about you?" Matthew retorted. "You were playing Lurty. You stabbed him. Perhaps you did it too well tonight. The dagger went into Jasper's chest and he went into the trapdoor hole."

At last someone had thought of an obvious answer. But if it was

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correct, I wondered, who had moved the wagon? There were two puzzles here.

"I didn't touch him," cried Daniel, bravado gone. "My dagger went under his arm as usual. Look, it's still here." He took it out of a sacking sheath tied round his waist. "No blood."

"Could have wiped it," Matthew jeered.

"You find what on then," Daniel retorted.

It was time I put the tuggy cloth over this chimney, and got sweeping myself. This dagger, I said to myself, is important if, as I believed, this was a most vile murder. However vile the victim, his murder is worse. No one, I reasoned, could be sure of killing him by the fall alone, and it could not be accident, as someone had to have pushed the wagon; even so, how could the murderer have ensured he would fall on the dagger?

Supposing, I thought, it was two of them acting together like master sweep and chummy. Annie pushes the wagon—and Daniel digs in the dagger, wiping it clean afterwards. That brush was stuck twice, I realised, for firstly Annie and Daniel were the wrong combination, and secondly, we all saw Hamlet jumping, without apparently having felt the dagger in his chest, and his howl came too late for that.

Now if a sweep's brush is stuck in the chimney, maybe there's a bend he doesn't know about, a dead flat, for instance—that being a flue that goes off horizontally from the one you're in. All climbing boys, present and former, know about dead flats. They can wriggle and squirm all they like, but if they're stuck in one of those, there's only one way out, and that's making a hole in the chimney. It was time for me to make that hole here.

"You'll be the one they call Ratcatcher, sir," I observed amiably to Montague Perks.

All trace of servility fled from his face, and his eyes glittered. "Watch it, sweepie," he snarled.

I stood my ground, sending up a prayer to the Lord to send the crushers quickly.

"Oh, I am, sir. What happens between you and your audiences is up to you and the pigmen, but if Mr. Atkins knew about it and was asking you for dosh, you had as much reason to kill him as anyone here, so when the chance came, you took it."

"Going down any alleyways tonight, sweepie?" Oh yes, Perks was Ratcatcher, eyes gleaming in malevolence at being cornered.

"Only," I continued regretfully, "you couldn't have killed Mr. Atkins—" he looked a little less malevolent— "owing to the fact you sang your comic song, then stayed on stage until Mr. Atkins jumped into the grave. You couldn't have moved the wagon before Ophelia jumped, and you couldn't have gone down between then and the fatal leap."

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He grinned maliciously. "Nor could I have pushed a dagger in him."

"Oh yes, you could have done that. You were first down there, and you bent over the body, blocking the view from above. Simple to push a dagger or knife in. But it wasn't Hamlet's dagger, for that was lying by the body—that had no blood on it, and the murderer would hardly have had time to wipe it clean."

He chortled. "Your brain's gone, sweepie. Where is the bloody dagger then? Me or anyone else, the murderer would have to hide it. It wasn't me anyway, you said so yourself. I wonder who did move the wagon?"

I was inching myself along the dead flat again, praying for an upturn so that I might see the blessed light of day above. If I didn't, I knew I could count, courtesy of the Ratcatcher, on being dead meat in one of Mrs. Lovett's pies.

The atmosphere was inimical now, for the actors all knew they needed Perks for their dosh, and they didn't need a chimney sweep. I had to think quickly.

"You're right, Mr. Perks," I agreed. "Your chimney's clean, though someone else's can't be. Now are we all agreed that you were all together in the wings save for Miss Annie after the drowning scene and before the graveyard?"

"Yes," came the answer to that. They all seemed anxious to cling together now, for all their rantings earlier.

"I was with Daniel," Margery said eagerly.

"And Margery was with me," the gentleman replied gratefully.

"I didn't see either of you," Matthew said, defensive of Annie.

"We didn't see you, either, lad," Daniel said, as cockily as though he were already in Jasper's shoes as leading man. "You went down to the cellar, did you, to give Annie a hand?"

I spent the time while they argued on wandering round the cellar, thinking. I even went up to the stage, where I peered round the sacking to see that the audience had gone home, fully satisfied with their dramas, though outside I could hear the impatient roar of the mob for the next performance.

Perks followed me up, and the others—I was glad to see—were following him. I wondered why, however. And then I realised.

A little piece of rope is all it takes to hang a man, and there it was, fixed to the pulley for the scenery. That was how the wagon had been moved without the need for the murderer to be down there. He merely had to cut the rope ends, as soon as he ran down to the cellar to attend the corpse—with a dagger or knife in his hands.

Perks saw what I was looking at, and realised the game was up.

"Damn you to hell, sweepie," he yelled, but he didn't stop to help me on my way since he could hear the pigmen calling outside. He

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jumped for the auditorium, forgetting he'd never cancelled the second show. The young villains were swarming in, and Ned and the pigmen with them. They didn't stop to question me, for they jumped on Perks straightaway, as he'd provided himself with the constable's imitation pistol from *Sweeney Todd,* left conveniently on the stage.

"Gov, can we go now?" Ned pleaded. I'd spent much time showing the pigmen the scenery, the cut rope attached to the pulley, and the other ends on the wagon. The actors had been questioned and were full of praise for me, though it was mixed with the sourness of their sudden unemployment. Jasper's body had been taken away, and the new audience dismissed. It was time to go.

"What did he do with the dagger, Gov?" Ned asked casually, as we and the pigmen prepared to leave the cellar.

It was nowhere to be found. Ned looked around, then gazed in fascination at Mrs. Lovett's mutton pie. Slowly he lifted the pie lid and there it was, a knife covered in Jasper Atkins's blood.

The pigmen were abashed at Ned's having found what they couldn't, but were good enough to award him a pat of approval, and one even gave him two pennies for his pains. Thus the Lord had returned to us our entrance fees.

It had been a clever plan for the spur of the moment, as Perks took advantage of the bad feeling amongst the cast. But his plan wasn't clever enough to deceive our Lord, who sees through the darkest chimney, and had used a chummy as his agent.

Ned was very silent as we walked back along the Highway. It was noisy and crowded with tars, but no one bothered us.

"It's still your birthday, Ned," I reminded him gently, as we reached to Mrs. Piggs's.

Ned went even quieter.

"What's wrong, Ned?" I asked anxiously. "Not still thinking of poor Mr. Atkins and that dagger, are you?"

He gulped. "No. It's *Sweeney Todd.* I don't fancy a mutton pie, Gov." ●

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GILDING MISS LILY

by Brynn Bonner

When pseudonymous North Carolina author Brynn Bonner debuted in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories in 1998, she earned the field's top honor for new writers, the Robert L. Fish Award. This is the second of Ms. Bonner's stories to be published in *EQMM* since then. It displays her keen eye for the kinds of details that reveal character while also delivering a genuine mystery. †

Some days are the standard twenty-four-hour kind. Others need to be measured in archeological terms, and the world is forever changed when they are over. The past three days had been that kind.

I reported for my shift at Meadowglen Senior Rest and Recreation Center at seven A.M. on Wednesday anticipating a nursing-as-usual day. Meadowglen is situated in a rather ordinary suburb of Charlotte, North Carolina. It is a nice facility, as rest homes go, but it doesn't quite warrant the double pastoral imagery of its name, since it sits in the middle of a large expanse of concrete. Most of the staff and nurses, including me, refer to it as "Redundant R & R" when no administrators are within earshot.

I have worked at Meadowglen for a couple of years now. I have good coworkers. I feel needed and appreciated. My work life is satisfying—even if the rest of my life is suffering a drought. Two more years until I hit thirty and the only relationship that's lasted more than six months is with my cat.

As I walked into room 107 at 7:15, I pulled up short and blinked my eyes to make sure I was seeing what I surely *was* seeing.

Miss Lily Connors, eighty-seven years stubborn, sat in her bed with her legs splayed on either side of her rolling meal tray, which was deposited upside down on her bed. Its wheels pointed ceilingward and spun on their swivel bases like tacky garden ornaments. The whole apparatus teetered as Miss Lily gouged at the underside with a metal nail file.

"Miss Lily!" I called, rushing to her bedside and pushing the call

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button for reinforcements from the nurses' desk. "Let me get this down for you, you're going to hurt yourself!"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, grasping the support pole with both blue-veined hands. "It was a right smart of trouble getting it up here, and I need to fix it. It wobbles worse 'n a politician!"

"It's okay," I assured her. "I'll have Alvin look at it for you. He'll fix it. That's what we have a maintenance department for. But we need to get it off your bed."

She hesitated, but didn't loosen her grip on the pole. "Well now," she began deliberately, "Alvin's a nice enough boy, but when it comes to repairs he's about as much use as a milk bucket under a bull. I can do it, but it'd be a sight easier if I had the right tools. Don't suppose you could get me a Phillips-head screwdriver?"

I sighed. It was going to be a long day. I liked Miss Lily; in fact she was one of my favorite patients. She was a remarkable lady who knew about an astonishing range of things and never hesitated to share her wealth of information—solicited or not. I liked her style, but she could be a handful.

"We'll see," I said in my most soothing nurse-voice. "But for now, let's just get this down."

She shrugged, moving one scrawny leg aside to give me access to the table. I couldn't for the life of me imagine how she had gotten the thing up onto the bed alone. I tried to slide it to the foot of the bed as Miss Lily scooted away, crossed her arms over her chest, and huffed.

" 'We'll see!' " she said disdainfully. "The world's oldest kiss-off. Next you'll be telling me the check is in the mail!"

I opened my mouth to argue, but was cut short when Jennifer Hall, our latest rotation from the student-nurse pool, came into the room and surveyed the situation. "What the—?" she stopped and took in the table, my attempts to balance it, and Miss Lily Buddha-ed at the head of the bed.

"Help me get this thing down, will you?" I asked as I started to tip it over the end of the bed away from Miss Lily, who was still pouting.

"How did it get up here in the first place?" Jennifer asked, moving toward me and eyeing Miss Lily as if she already knew the answer to the question.

"I'll explain later," I said. "I'm getting behind on morning meds. Could I ask you to help out with getting this room ready for Miss Lily's new roommate?"

"Sure, whatever," said Jennifer sourly, obviously thrilled to be of service. She shot Miss Lily an accusing glance as if being given this additional task was all her fault.

Miss Lily had been alone in this double room for four days, since her roommate, Bess Roderick, had passed away in her sleep on an unremarkable Friday night. Mrs. Roderick had been a frail woman,

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quiet and sweet. Miss Lily had done most of the talking for both of them. She was having a hard time dealing with the loss.

Miss Lily was one of our "sundowners," completely lucid at times and easily confused and erratic at others. Like everything else about Miss Lily, whichever one she was, she was it to the hilt. I sometimes suspected that she feigned some of these episodes to manipulate the staff in the same way she possumed sleep when her nephew came to visit. I had caught her at this trick and questioned her about it. "Don't you like Lyle?" I asked. "Why don't you want to visit with him when he comes out to see you?"

"Oh, he's a good kid," she said, waving her hand dismissively. "But he's twenty-nine years old and works in finance. What could we have to talk about? I'm leaving him all my money, isn't that enough? I don't have to let him bore me to death to get it. Honestly, listen to him talk about his job for ten minutes—it's enough to make a preacher lay his Bible down!" she said, pressing her bony hands to her temples.

I tried to hide an involuntary smile. Lyle did seem to be a bit, well—bland. Miss Lily caught my amusement and winked, adding, "If he ever comes in here wearing a black motorcycle jacket, I'll give him my full attention. Until then, I'll keep napping through our visits. And don't you go giving me away!"

As I moved her now-upright table into position, she looked me squarely in the face, a strange look came into her eyes, and she swallowed hard. Her light tone was replaced by a raspy whisper. "I'd like to have that screwdriver," she said. "It's not just for the table. They might do me like they did Bess. I need it for protection. People in here sometimes think they can do you any old way."

"What is it you think someone did?" I asked, putting my hand on her shoulder. "Mrs. Roderick just took a turn for the worse. You know that. No one mistreated her."

"You weren't here," she said, regaining her assurance. "There were some hinky things going on before she died. I don't want to be next."

"Look, Miss Lily," I said, glancing at my watch face, which was tick-tocking me further behind schedule as I indulged this mayhem fantasy. "I know you miss her, we all do. But it was just her time. Would you like to talk to the social worker or the chaplain about this?"

"What I'd *like,*" she said, twisting her hand in front of her, "is a *PHILLIPS-HEAD SCREWDRIVER!*" She turned to Jennifer and squinted her eyes in her best impression of the wicked witch closing in on Dorothy. "And *you,*" she said, repeating the gesture in Jennifer's direction, "be sure to tell everyone I've got it!"

Jennifer recoiled briefly and then turned to me, making no reply to Miss Lily, whose stare followed her like a homing device. "I'll go

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get fresh linens," Jennifer said, positioning herself so that her back was turned to the elderly woman.

"I'll be back in soon," I told Miss Lily. "In the meantime, you get ready for breakfast. You'll want to go down to the dining room today. It's omelet day."

"A gourmet treat, I'm sure," Miss Lily answered sarcastically. "It's amazing what a really talented cafeteria cook can do with Egg Beaters and Velveeta!"

"I thought old people were supposed to be sweet," Jennifer complained as we worked our way down the hall with the medication cart. "She's a crabby old thing. And crazy as a loon to boot."

Nursing, for Jennifer, was not exactly a divine calling. She had confided to the nursing assistant, who also served as the resident office gossip, that she had a goal in mind. She would finish her degree, find her way into a major metropolitan hospital, survey the promising young physician population, acquire a target, and become Mrs. Dr. Somebody Rich within the next five years. After that she would never have to personally deal with those troubling inconveniences called patients again.

"Jennifer," I began, speaking softly and resisting the impulse to sit her in the corner and put my finger in her face, "we need to treat the patients with dignity and respect. They are whole people. You are only seeing a portion of them. We try to find out about their lives before they came here and factor that into our perceptions of who they are."

"What do you mean?" asked Jennifer, looking at me as if I might be trying to sell her a spoiled melon. "Who she is? She's a mean, paranoid old woman, *that's* who she is!"

"Well, that may be what you see, but you're only looking at today. Did you know that she was a geologist who has traveled the world many times over? Or that she went into that profession when there were only a handful of women doing it? Or that she is one of the most well-read people you will ever meet? Or that her fiancé was killed in a blasting accident in nineteen thirty-four and she made a vow never to marry?"

"No, I didn't know any of that," said Jennifer hesitantly. I could see the wheels turning. She was trying to fathom how any of this was pertinent. I was pushing a boulder uphill.

"Well, think about it, anyway, the next time you have any dealings with Miss Lily. She likes to be called that, incidentally. Miss Lily, not Miss Connors. It's what the guys she worked with used to call her as sort of an inside joke—like Miss Kitty from *Gunsmoke*—the woman who could hold her own with all the men!"

Jennifer stared at me vacantly, pulled both shoulders up, and spread her palms.

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"Never mind," I said, "before your time." Actually before mine, too, but I had reruns! I turned to wheel the cart into the medication room and another thought occurred to me. "And Jennifer," I said, poking my head around the door jamb, "we try not to use terms like 'crazy as a loon' around here. It sounds a little, well—nonclinical!"

She gave me a "whatever" shrug and went off in search of linens.

I fell further behind as the day progressed, so that by lunchtime I had decided to make do with an apple while I worked on charts. I was two charts and three bites into the task when someone hovering near the nurses' desk launched into a throat-clearing *bur-r-r* as effective as a doorbell. I looked up into the flustered face of Lyle Ketchins.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said, shifting his weight from one Reebok to the other. "But, my aunt, she's very upset. She keeps talking about something that she thinks happened to her roommate. She's pretty agitated. I know you're her favorite nurse. You seem to have a way with her. Would you mind checking on her?"

Flattery will get you everywhere with me, especially if my alternate choice is paperwork and an overripe apple. "Sure," I said, coming around the desk. "I knew she was a bit unsettled this morning. But I looked in on her in the dayroom about an hour ago and she was watching television and seemed fine. What *exactly* does she think happened, did she tell you that, Mr. Ketchins?"

"Lyle, please," he said as he two-stepped to catch up to my movement down the hall. "She seems to have gotten it into her head that Mrs. Roderick's niece and nephew had some part in her death. I think this whole thing has affected her pretty deeply. Maybe it's all just part of her condition, but I hate to see her like this."

"I know it's hard for you, and you're right, some of this probably is a part of her illness, but having a friend die is hard on any of us."

Miss Lily paced in front of the window in her small room. Her head snapped up and she looked fearful for a moment and then relaxed as recognition set in. "Julia, is it time for your shift to end already?"

"No, Miss Lily," I said, "it's only lunchtime. I just thought I'd stop in and see how you were doing. Lyle says you're upset."

"Upset." She said the word as if trying to divine its meaning. Then her face hardened. "Upset doesn't half get it! My best friend gets carried off to the great beyond—maybe with some help—and nobody will listen to me, because they think I'm a crazy old hen."

Sometimes the best way to help patients work through things is just to encourage them to talk about it and get it all out. Then it doesn't seem to plague them any longer. "Tell me what you think happened to Mrs. Roderick," I said, trying to sound sincere.

"How do I know?" she asked. "I was asleep. I'd sleep through the

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Second Coming. All I know is something was not right during that whole last week before Bess died. Something just wasn't in plumb!"

"Well," I began, keeping my tone level, "Mrs. Roderick was taking more medication, you know that. I know it made it difficult for you two to communicate, but she really needed it to stay comfortable, Miss Lily."

"I know *that,*" she snapped, obviously not buying my sincerity package. "I'm just telling you, there was something not right about the way that niece and nephew of hers suddenly started coming around. Never came around once in six years and then, out of the blue, they visit every week like clockwork. Roll her out into the garden. Take her out for Sunday drives. The two of them, looking like they just got off the train from a Grim Reapers' Convention. Creepy-looking pair. I'm telling you, something was not right!"

"Okay, Miss Lily, I'll tell you what," I said, dropping all hope of subterfuge. "I'll talk to Dr. McGuire and make sure there was nothing unusual, and I'll check the visitors' log and see if they were here that night, how's that? Is that what you want?"

She gave me a penetrating look and slowly nodded. "That," she said, "and a Phillips-head screwdriver!"

I bid goodbye to Lyle in the hallway and returned to my charts. I was making steady progress when Jennifer approached the desk, a self-satisfied smile plastered on her face and a definite sashay in her walk.

"You'll be happy to hear," she began, addressing me, but taking in Janine, the senior nurse on the floor, "that I've been doing just what you told me. We got the new one in 107 and I asked her all about herself. I know more about her than I do about my own mother." She turned slightly toward me. "And believe me, it's about as interesting," she continued under her breath.

Janine, who was working on the personnel schedule for next month, gave me a sly grin. Janine would be the one to give Jennifer her evaluation, and she recognized a grease job when she heard one.

"That's very commendable, Jennifer," Janine said in her best schoolmarm voice.

Jennifer beamed, oblivious to Janine's wry tone, turned, and flounced away.

"Lord, Lord," said Janine, clapping her long ebony fingers across her forehead. "That girl is shallow as a birdbath! What was all that about anyway?"

I gave her the Cliff Notes version of my earlier lecture to Jennifer and she shrugged. "Worth a try!" she said, displaying a noticeable lack of expectation.

"You know," she said, more serious now, "I need to be reminded that these are whole people once in a while myself. It's easy to get

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disconnected." She adjusted the bobby pin on her nurse's cap. Janine was one of the few nurses I knew who still wore a traditional cap, though since it crowned a cascade of tiny cornrow braids and topped off an ever-rotating assortment of psychedelic scrubs, it didn't seem exactly traditional.

"Since I've been chained to this desk," she continued, "I don't have a chance to talk to them like I used to. Like with Bess Roderick. I'll really miss her. What a sweet old love she was."

"That's right," I said, "you've been here since she came, haven't you?"

"Filled out the admission papers myself," Janine said. "On her *and* Mr. Roderick. He passed on about three years ago, just before you came on staff, I think. Nice pair of people. Married fifty-two years. No kids; totally devoted to one another."

"Miss Lily is having a very hard time with her death. She's got it into her head that someone did something bad to her. She'd like to nominate the niece and nephew," I said, knowing Janine's fondness for Miss Lily and her antics.

"Actually, that'd be pretty good casting. Have you seen those two? Dress all in black and don't move their mouths hardly at all when they talk. But I guess when you've got that much money you're used to people listening close."

"They're rich?" I asked.

"Filthy," was Janine's succinct reply. "Their mother, Bess's sister, married money that can only be measured in great gobs—on her *fourth* trip to the altar. Some tycoon type."

"But they came to visit Mrs. Roderick regularly. They must have some redeeming qualities," I ventured.

"I guess. Color me shocked!" Janine conceded, getting up from her chair to post the schedule on the bulletin board. "They obviously weren't after her money. Mrs. Roderick didn't have any. I thought maybe their mother guilted them into it. She used to come herself about once a month, before she got sick. Swept in like a movie star, always all dolled up, trailing an expensive fragrance and a stinky attitude all the way down the hall. She was one of those women who can never be happy. If she goes to heaven, she'll ask to see the upstairs. You know what I mean? She and Bess—"

"I feel sort of silly even asking this," I interrupted, "but were they around here that day, the niece and nephew? The day Mrs. Roderick died?"

Janine lowered her head and gave me a "get real" look.

I felt ridiculous. "Okay, okay, I said I'd ask. Now I've asked."

Janine laughed and patted my shoulder. "Julia, you tell Miss Lily that nobody was around that day lookin' like they were huntin' for *The Addams Family* auditions, including those two. The ideas that woman gets! I'm telling you, she's a pure livin' mess!"

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Time seemed to accelerate through the rest of the afternoon. About four, I ran into Dr. McGuire outside the physical therapy room. "How was Ireland?" I asked, trying to keep the envy from oozing out around my words.

"Oh, Julia, it was absolutely phenomenal," he answered. "It was the greatest three weeks you could ever imagine. It just went by too fast. I've got to take vacations more often. This was our first in three years."

I had a little flashback to how stupid I had felt when I asked Janine about Mrs. Roderick's niece and nephew. But a promise was a promise. I plunged in.

"Dr. McGuire, I'd appreciate it if you could spend an extra few minutes with Miss Lily on your way out. She's not making a very good adjustment to Mrs. Roderick's death."

I laughed to let him know that I was aware that what I was about to say was absurd. "In fact, she's not convinced Mrs. Roderick went naturally, bless her heart."

Dr. McGuire grunted a little laugh. "Miss Lily," he said, drawing out the words. "She's somethin', isn't she? But still, I can understand. Even I was a little taken aback by how Mrs. Roderick looked when I got back from vacation. She had lost a lot of weight in a short period of time and had really taken a quick slide. We didn't do a complete autopsy, if that's what you're asking, but she died of heart failure."

He cocked his head to one side and frowned in concentration for a second, then said in a low voice, "One thing that did surprise me, she'd had a facelift at some point in her life. I didn't take her for the vain type. She always seemed like such a what-you-see-is-what-you-get kind of lady." He frowned again and said, almost to himself, "Strange, you don't always know—" then waved and headed off down the hall. "I'll look in on Miss Lily," he called over his shoulder.

Never in a million years would I have taken Bess Roderick for a nip-'n'-tucker. I thought back to the lecture I had given Jennifer and felt a little sheepish. Maybe I didn't know the patients as well as I thought. But at least I had fulfilled my promise to Miss Lily. I decided to look in on her after I clocked out. There was nothing pressing on my schedule for the evening. The cat could certainly make do without me for an extra half-hour.

When I finally finished for the day, I gathered my things and deposited three quarters into the vending machine in the staff lounge. An ice-cold can of Diet Pepsi chunked into the reach hole and I grabbed it and made my way to Miss Lily's room. Her new roommate was shuffling down the corridor to the dining hall as I entered the room. Miss Lily, a little cricket of a woman, sat primly in her bed in a jungle-print bed jacket.

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"Aren't you going down to supper?" I asked.

"They want me to sit with her," she said, jerking her head in the direction of the other bed. "I don't particularly feel like listening to her yak anymore today. The woman talks a hundred and fifty miles an hour," she said sourly, then poked her finger at me for emphasis, "with gusts up to a hundred and ninety! I'm gonna have them bring me a tray."

"Give it a little time, you'll get used to one another," I said, pointing to a chair and raising my eyebrows for permission to sit.

She nodded. "Not that I'm not happy for your company, but isn't it past time for you to be home with your shoes kicked off?" Her eyes went to my Pepsi can and she clucked disapprovingly. "Don't tell me you're on one of those cockamamie diets! You're skin and bone now. I don't understand girls today. You'd all better hope against famine. You'd not be long for this world if you had to live off your fat stores."

I thought this was ironic coming from a woman whose bird-legs, devoid of pajama bottoms, now moved across the room to retrieve a small notebook from her dresser. She opened the book and moved her hand across the page as she came back to the bed. She motioned in my direction with the notebook. "I write things down in the morning while my brain is still tracking. Sometimes I don't know 'sic 'em' from 'come here' by this time of day."

She studied the notes for a moment and pressed her hand to her cheek, concentrating.

"Do you remember when we talked this morning?" I asked casually. "You wanted me to double-check about Mrs. Roderick? I did that, Miss Lily, and everything about her passing was perfectly natural, no mischief afoot. There's no danger to you. You can relax."

She stared at me vacantly for a moment, then turned her attention back to her notebook again, stroking the page with her finger. She eyed me, then looked around the room as though searching for something. "I had it earlier. I know I had it figured. But now it's all cross-wired!"

It was heartrending to see her this way. "It's okay, Miss Lily. Dr. McGuire himself said he could understand your confusion. He said Mrs. Roderick looked a lot different even to him since she'd lost so much weight during his vacation and had gotten so frail."

"Well, she did fall off pretty quick there," she said, a little confidence coming back into her voice. "She wasn't ever exactly plump, but she had a little extra and then, overnight, it looked like she fell off by twenty pounds."

"That's right," I said, happy to see her regaining her spirit. "So she did look different. And with her passing on during the night

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when you'd been sleeping, it's natural you'd be a little fuzzy. It's a hard thing to lose a friend."

She frowned and looked at her notebook again, then shook her head and mumbled. "One thing I can tell you—everything that bumps around in the dark ain't Santa Claus."

I could think of no reply to this statement, so I finished the last of my aspartame cocktail and rose to leave. "Oh," I said, as I slipped on my jacket. "I also asked about the niece and nephew. They hadn't been here since the Sunday before she died."

Miss Lily looked up at me sharply as if she had just thought of something, but the idea escaped before she could capture it. She shook her head and pounded on the mattress in frustration. "I guess they just spook me. He's not so much—I don't think he's wrapped too tight, if you know what I mean—but that girl, she's a schemer. I can see it in her." Then the look of uncertainty played across her face again. "Or maybe I'm just getting too old to understand young people," she said sadly.

"You understand plenty," I said, stooping to hug her shoulders. "I just came by to let you know that you don't need to be worried about anything, so you can rest well tonight."

She lifted her flinty blue eyes to me, tears beginning to form. "The thing is, I think Bess was really put out with me about something when she died."

"Why in the world would you think that?" I asked. I found the idea of friction between the two women inconceivable.

"She never spoke a word to me for days before she died. Anytime she opened her eyes she'd just give me a hateful stare. You know how Bess was, mild as a moonbeam. I don't know what I did to get her so mad."

I patted her leg. "I'm sure she was just not feeling well. And her medications—I'm sure she wasn't angry with you. You just misunderstood her condition." Miss Lily didn't seem convinced. I murmured more reassurance and started toward the door, running into Lyle, literally, as he turned into the room. It took a minute to extract my purse strap from a tangle with the tote bag he was carrying. We stepped back, each uttering apologies.

Lyle had returned to deliver Miss Lily's favorite toiletries and candy treats. She thanked him but let him know that her dinner hour and her favorite TV program were both imminent, effectively dismissing him.

He turned to me awkwardly and, in a long rush of air, spewed out, "Have you had dinner? —Could I take you to dinner at Cafe Italiano?—Do you like Italian food?—You've probably already eaten—I'm sorry."

I played mental catch-up, then thought about what awaited me at my apartment. Stacked up against a dinner at Cafe Italiano, a

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frozen block of Lean Cuisine wasn't too appealing.

"That would be great, Lyle. I love Italian food," I replied, and Miss Lily gave us a shooing motion as her tray arrived.

"Good night, Miss Lily," I called from the doorway. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'll be here," she said with a hearty wave, "if nothing breaks or comes untwisted!"

Lyle turned out to be an engaging dinner companion once he got over his jitters. He wanted, he said, to thank me for the special attention I had given to Miss Lily. I demurred, saying it was all part of my job. But we both knew I played favorites with her.

"You're awfully devoted to her, Lyle," I said, wondering why he kept coming when she was borderline rude to him—and frequently crossed the border.

"I know how it looks," Lyle said, rubbing his hands on the legs of his jeans. "She doesn't have much use for me, but I have always just been fascinated with family stories about Aunt Lily. I never knew her growing up, she was always away someplace exotic. She's such an interesting character. I think someone should capture that."

"Capture it?" I asked as I plunged my fork into a mountain of penne pasta with marinara sauce.

Lyle looked away, then picked up his water glass. "You know, capture it on paper. I thought I might write about her."

"You're a writer?" I asked, making it sound insultingly unlikely. I tried again. "I mean, I didn't know you were interested in writing."

"Well, I wouldn't call myself a writer. I just find some things interesting and jot down ideas and fool around with it. It's just a hobby really. But I really enjoy it, and if ever there was a subject worth writing about, it would be Aunt Lily." He pronounced the last with confidence and set his water glass firmly on the table. He looked at me with eyes that I now noticed were an astounding blue. So, there was a secret side of Lyle Ketchins. I wondered what Aunt Lily would think about this.

We passed the rest of dinner in pleasant conversation. Then, over cannoli I'd feel guilty about for days, I tried to reassure Lyle—and myself. "I think she's easier about this now, but honestly I think it's contagious. Nothing was unusual about Bess Roderick's death, but still, I just . . . "

"I know what you mean," Lyle said. "She's got me going, too. It's like Aunt Lil says, it just seems a little off kilter. You know, I was going to take Aunt Lily to the funeral. I thought that would help her with the grieving. But when I called to find out about the arrangements I was told it was family only, and the next thing I

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knew she was cremated and the whole thing was over. I talked to the funeral director to ask about flowers and he told me there were only four people at the service: the niece and nephew, the family lawyer, and the attendant from the mortuary. That just doesn't seem like a fitting end for such a nice lady. Mrs. Roderick was everybody's idea of a grandmother."

He was right, though in point of fact she'd never had children, much less grands.

"Mrs. Roderick's sister wasn't there?" I asked.

"Oh no, she's very ill herself, housebound, at least that's what I hear. Her husband wasn't there either, for obvious reasons," he said and turned his attention back to doctoring his coffee.

"Obvious reasons?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, I thought you knew the family circumstances," he said. "I didn't mean you *should* know, or that you—oh, forget it!" He took a deep breath, willing away the awkwardness. "Anyway, Mrs. Roderick's sister is married to Walter Pagett. He is, or was, a very big deal in the financial world." He launched into a recitation of Pagett's various holdings, buyouts, sellouts, and mergers.

I was beginning to understand why Miss Lily feigned sleep. "Time out," I interrupted. "All this is really wasted on me. What I gather you are saying is that he's loaded."

"And then some," he replied. "But fat lot of good it does him now. He's been institutionalized for the past two years. Doesn't even know his own name."

"I guess that helps explain why the brother and sister wanted a relationship with their Aunt Bess. They're sort of alone in the world, with their mother an invalid and their father mentally incapacitated." I was thinking out loud and conjuring up a mental image of the two of them, clad in their black outfits and lifeless expressions, moving down the hall to room 107 in search of love and acceptance. I was absorbed in my little interior movie when an exasperated, "Was it something I said?" brought me back.

Lyle was peering at me, an uneasy question mark formed on his face. "Of course not," I said, "I just drifted off for a moment. What were you saying?"

"Nothing important, just that Walter Pagett isn't their father, he's their stepfather. Mrs. Roderick's sister only married him about four or five years ago. He went around the bend about two years into the marriage, while the twins were traipsing around Europe visiting cemeteries."

"The twins," I said, processing this information. "You mean they actually *are* twins. I thought people were just being snide when they referred to them that way, because of the clothes and all. Where's their natural father in the picture?"

"Long gone, from what I understand," Lyle said. "The only rea-

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son they're a topic of conversation at all is because they're Pagett's stepchildren. I gather Mrs. Roderick's sister, Marjorie, was quite the siren in her day and kept her skills polished well into her sixties and seventies. A bit of a gold digger, I take it. They say old Walter is her fourth husband, and that only counts the legal liaisons. I imagine she thought she'd hit pay dirt when she landed him. And the pre-nup, which is SOP these days for someone like him, was actually pretty soft. The marriage only had to last five years for her to inherit a hefty sum. She's probably passed that mark now, or at least she'll be moving up on it fast. Course, she's in no condition to enjoy it. I guess that's the irony of it."

"Is she older or younger than Mrs. Roderick?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," said Lyle. "I guess I just assumed she was younger by the way everyone described her. I've never actually met the lady. Why?"

"No particular reason," I said. "Just curious. It just sounds like these sisters were polar opposites. You wonder how two people who grew up in the same family could turn out to be so different."

I got home three hours late that night and my calico, Bob, was quite annoyed by the time I plopped the hockey puck of cat food into his dish. He gave me a haughty look that clearly said, "About time!" then turned back to his premium chopped liver. I was beginning to understand how Lyle felt when he visited his Aunt Lily.

Miss Lily's paranoia *was* contagious. All through the following work day I was plagued by a strange sense of unease. I obsessed about Mrs. Roderick's sister, and about her strange niece and nephew. Finally, about midafternoon, I called Lyle at his office.

I quickly assured him that Miss Lily was fine, thanked him for dinner the night before, then got down to the real reason for my call.

"I thought I'd pay a condolence call on Mrs. Roderick's family after work today. You had mentioned that you wanted to send flowers or something. Would you like to go along with me?"

"Sure," he said, sounding a bit uncertain. "Do you want me to pick you up there?"

"Gee, I don't know," I said, feeling silly about this impulse. "I don't even know where they live."

"No problem, I can find out. Should we call first?"

"That would be proper etiquette, wouldn't it?" I replied. "But then, we know someone will be there since Mrs. Pagett is housebound. Let's just go."

I clocked out at 4:30 and found Lyle waiting in the lobby. He was dressed in a conservative suit and tie, looking all business. The attire transformed him. He seemed totally at ease as he rose to greet me. "Julia," he said, craning to look at me around the schefflera

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plant I was holding with both hands, "that's some calling card."

I set the plant on a chair, then hesitated. "This sounded like a good idea this morning, but now I'm wondering what I was thinking." I looked questioningly at Lyle.

"I don't know, but whatever it was, let's get to it," he said confidently. "This has been bugging me, too. What is it they call it when two people have the same delusion? A *folie à deux*—a shared madness? Well, I guess that's what this is."

"Not quite," I said, laughing. "Don't forget Miss Lily. We're at least a trio. But I think we may be embellishing even Miss Lily's far-out notions!"

Lyle was a good driver, and I relaxed on the drive out to horse country, where the Pagett estate covered acres of lawn and still more of pasture land. I found myself sneaking glances at his profile as he maneuvered the winding roads. He really was good-looking, in a bookish sort of way. But then, I like books.

An honest-to-pete uniformed maid answered the door. She wore one of those little French getups that are usually reserved for parody—or porno. She ushered us, along with our gangly plant, into a glass enclosure she called the garden room, where we found ourselves surrounded by enormous potted trees and plants of every variety. She went off to announce us to the gentry.

"I guess this is a little superfluous," I whispered to Lyle, gesturing toward the schefflera, which now seemed pitiful.

The niece entered the room and I panicked when I realized I had no idea what her name was. She had always just been "the niece."

"Ms. Abbott," Lyle said, standing and extending his hand. "I hope we're not coming at an inconvenient time. We wanted to stop by to express our condolences." He introduced us both.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I extended my own hand. Lyle had bailed me out. I owed him big time.

"Call me Lydia, please," she said, but did not change her expression. "Thank you very much for coming. Aunt Bess was a wonderful person. We miss her." She said the words mechanically and accepted the plant with all the warmth of a robot.

An awkward silence ensued, and then the maid came back into the room. "Miss Lydia, I'm sorry to interrupt, but Mr. Crawford is on the phone for the conference call with you and Mr. Gordon. He's insistent that he needs to speak with you now."

Lydia looked at us and seemed to be debating. Finally she said, "I'm sorry, I have to take this, I'll be awhile, but if you'd like to wait . . ." Her tone indicated that she would not be disappointed if we couldn't, but we nodded.

She turned her attention to the maid. "Gordon is out on the tennis court. Would you get him, Anita, and tell him to come to the upstairs study?"

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They went their separate ways, and Lyle and I sat in the wicker chairs that looked out on the west side of the house where several horses—of what breed I was clueless—munched grass and swung their tails contentedly.

We were exchanging small talk about the palatial surroundings when we heard a crash coming from down the long hallway. We automatically moved to the doorway and saw an agitated young woman in nurse's whites appear at an open door calling, "Anita, come help me! Mrs. Pagett has fallen!"

Lyle and I looked at one another. I started off down the hall—a nurse's conditioned response. Lyle hesitated for a moment, then followed.

I dashed into the room, explaining along the way, "I'm a nurse. Anita has gone outside, I'll help you. What have we got? Is she injured?"

She looked up at me from where she knelt beside the woman, who was moaning softly. "No, I think she's okay. Nothing broken. Just shaken. I thought she was asleep," she lamented. "I just stepped into the bathroom for a moment."

I stopped dead in my tracks as my gaze transferred to the woman on the floor. The woman was strikingly familiar—and yet *not*. Still, except for the coiffured ginger-colored hair—in a shade nature didn't create—a slather of makeup, an extra twenty pounds of weight, and the elegant satin pajamas and bed jacket . . .

We checked her over, were satisfied that moving her posed no risk, and were just getting her back into bed when Lydia came into the room, more animated than I had ever seen her, which still wasn't saying much. "What's going on in here?" she asked, looking around the room.

"Your mother fell, Miss Abbott, but she's okay," the nurse informed her nervously. "I'm so sorry. I just turned my back for a moment. I'll call the doctor and have him take a look at her, but I think she's fine, just a bit disoriented."

"Never mind," said Lydia, her voice level. "I'll call him myself." She moved to the edge of the bed and, staring out the window rather than at the woman in the bed, asked loudly, "Are you okay, Mother? Are we going to have to put the restraints back on to keep you from falling? You've got to stay in bed. You're too weak to be getting up, we've told you that. You're going to hurt yourself." She patted the woman's arm stiffly and turned to me.

I stood staring at the woman who now lay with her eyes closed, exhausted. Lydia must have noticed my expression and she offered: "We have to watch her more closely now. She doesn't realize how weak she is. That's why we had to hire Miss Cooper"—she nodded toward the young nurse—"to keep an eye on her." Her tone indicated her belief that the "eye" had not done its job.

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"I just—I never," I began and turned to Lyle to bail me out again. But he just stood staring at Mrs. Pagett, oblivious to our conversation. "I've never met your mother. I'm just amazed by how much she looks like Mrs. Roderick," I stammered.

"Yes, twins run in our family. Mother and Aunt Bess were identical twins, I thought you knew that."

I let out the breath I hadn't realized I had been holding and felt foolish—again! This was getting to be a way of life. "No," I said lamely. "I didn't know."

"I don't mean to be rude," Lydia continued, alerting us that she was getting ready to be. "But this probably isn't the best time for a visit. May I ask you to call again another day when things are a little calmer?" She turned her back to her mother's bed and motioned toward the door.

Lyle snapped out of his zone and came around to extend his hand and say the right things while I bent to pick up my sunglasses from the floor. They had fallen off their usual perch on the top of my head when we were getting Mrs. Pagett back into bed. As Lydia moved Lyle toward the door, I straightened and started after them. Suddenly, the patient's eyes flew open and she drilled me with an iron look and mouthed, "Julia. Help me. Get me out of here!"

Miss Lily stood by her bed, turning the pages of the newspaper strewn across it. "Ye gods and little fishes," she said as I entered the room. "You are the woman of the hour!" She padded across the room to meet me, again sans pajama bottoms, but this time she sported a pair of satin boxers. "I knew you'd figure this thing out! It was a tough job all right, like trying to put socks on a rooster, but you did it!" She stood on tiptoe to pat me on the back.

As I've said before, I am a sucker for flattery, but this was totally undeserved. "I wish I could pretend that it was my superior analytical skills that got to the bottom of this whole thing," I said, holding up my hand like a crossing guard signaling stop, "but you and I both know it was pure dumb luck."

"Lucky for *me!*" came a weak voice from the other bed. Bess Roderick sat propped up in bed, recovering nicely after her ordeal. "I still can't believe all this happened to me," she said in a reedy little voice. "Really, I don't know if I understand it all yet."

I explained as best I could the course of events. Marjorie Pagett had been an exceptionally strong-willed person, but even she couldn't argue with cancer. She knew she didn't have long to live and was determined that her investment in the Pagett marriage would pay off for her kids. When she found herself rapidly weakening, she had concocted a scheme to lengthen "her" life until she had fulfilled her minimum requirement for the pre-nuptial agreement. She would switch places with Bess, who, though ill, had a

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better prognosis. Lydia and Gordon were dispatched to begin a pattern of visits and outings with Bess. Then, when the time was right, they were moved into action. They arrived at Meadowglen that fateful afternoon to take Bess on a Sunday drive, then spent the afternoon with hair dyes and costuming and hypodermic needles. When the twins returned "Bess" to Meadowglen that Sunday evening, Marjorie knew she didn't have long. She closed in on herself and waited for the end. But she took comfort in knowing that in two more months, the pre-nuptial period would be over, and Lydia and Gordon would be set for life.

"I know you loved your sister, Bess," Miss Lily said, shaking her head as she went to stand by her friend's bed. "But she did you dirt. She fixed it so's they'd kidnap you and have everybody think it was you that died. And they hired that nurse and told her you were senile, so she'd never believe anything you said if you tried to tell her who you were. But they had you pretty doped up, too, so I guess they didn't figure on you *tryin'* to tell!"

"And if you hadn't kept wheedlin' us, we'd never have discovered what happened and Mrs. Roderick would never have made it back to us," I said to Miss Lily.

She grinned. "Well, that's what I've been good at all my life. I *do* know how to cause a dust-up!"

"And you," I said to Bess. "You were very smart to signal me the way you did at the house. I nearly fainted when you said my name! I was shaking all over when we got to the car and I told Lyle. Miss Lily, you'd have been so proud of him. He was one cool customer. I was afraid he might think I had lost my mind. But he just nodded, gave a look back at the house, and drove straight back into town. He walked into the sheriff's office and laid it all out for him while I just sat there stunned and useless."

"Well, you've gotta give him his due, he surprised me all right!" Lily said.

"Oh, he's just full of surprises," I said, grinning and motioning to the doorway.

Lyle stepped through and Miss Lily stood transfixed, then cackled with glee. He sported full regalia: black boots, black leather pants, chains, a black leather jacket, and aviator glasses. He slipped a thumb underneath his belt and struck a pose. "So Aunt Lil," he asked in his best DeNiro, "we talkin', or what?"

She was silent for a moment then clapped her hands. "I never saw the beat of it!" she exclaimed.

She turned and shook her finger at me. "You got a big mouth, girlie! And come to think of it, you got some brass about you!"

"From you, Miss Lily," I said, glancing at a beaming Lyle, "I'll take that as the highest compliment!" ●

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Myth

by Ruth Rendell

It was a map of the Garden of Eden. The monk, who was also their guide, pointed it out to them under its protective glass and said something in Greek. The interpreter interpreted. Made in the eighth century A.D. by one Alexander of Philae, the map had been in this monastery for a thousand years, had been stolen, retrieved, threatened by fire and flood, defaced, patched up, and finally restored to its present near-perfect condition.

The tour party crowded around to look at it. Rosemary Meacher, standing in front of her much taller husband, saw a sheet of yellowish parchment that looked as if coffee had been spilt over it, spindly-legged insects died on it, and a child experimented on its mottled surface with a new paintbox. The monk made another short speech in Greek. The interpreter said that, if they were interested, on their way out they could buy postcards of the map at the shop.

"Or tea towels perhaps," whispered Rosemary to her husband, "or tablecloths with matching napkins."

David Meacher made no reply. He had moved to a position beside her and was peering closely at the map. For the first time since their holiday began, for the first time really since he was made redundant, his face wore an expression that was neither bitter nor indifferent. He was looking at the map as if it interested him.

The monk and the interpreter moved on; through the library, through the refectory, out into cloisters. The party followed. Flaking frescoes and faded murals were pointed out, their provenance

In an era in which the shelf-life of books of fiction seems to be getting shorter and shorter, Ruth Rendell's works, both the short story collections and the novels, have proved extremely long-lived. Among the many reprints and reissues of her early work are three upcoming paperbacks from Vintage Crime: *One Across, Two Down; Lake of Darkness; The Fallen Curtain* (all 2001). †

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explained. The hot sun was white and trembling on the stone flags, the shadows black. Thankfully, the party surged into the shop.

There were no tea towels or tablecloths or aprons or even calendars of the map of the Garden of Eden, but there were the postcards and life-size facsimiles. Framed or unframed.

"You don't really want one, do you?" Rosemary said.

"Yes, of course I do." David had taken to barking at her lately, especially if, as now, she seemed even mildly to oppose his wishes. "I think it's very beautiful, a marvellous piece of history."

"As you wish."

He bought a framed map and then, on second thoughts, an unframed map as well and four postcards. Back at the hotel he got her to pack the framed map, parcelled in bubble-wrap and their clothes, into their carry-on bag. The unframed map he spread out on the desk top, weighting down its corners with the ashtray, two glasses, and the stand that held the room-service menu. He sat down with his elbows on the desk and studied the map. After dinner, instead of going to the bar, he went back to their room and she found him there later, crouched over the desk. From somewhere or other he had procured a magnifying glass.

She was pleased. He had found something to take him out of himself. These were probably early days to think of a hobby developing from it, that he might begin collecting old maps, antiquarian books, something like that. But surely this was how such things began. She vaguely remembered hearing that an uncle of hers had started collecting stamps because a friend sent him a letter from Outer Mongolia. If only David would find an interest!

Since the loss of his job, he had been a changed man, sullen, bad-tempered, sometimes savage in his manner towards her. And he had been very unhappy. The large sum of money he received in compensation, the golden handshake, had done nothing to mitigate his misery. He still spoke daily of the Chief Executive, a young woman, walking into his office, telling him to clear his desk and go.

"I'll never forget it," he said. "Her face, that red mouth like a slice of raw beef, and that tight bright-blue suit showing her fat knees. And her voice, not a word of excuse or apology, not a hint of shame."

Rosemary saw, to her horror, that he had tears in his eyes. She thought it would help when the cheque that came was twice what he expected. She thought he might put those humiliating events behind him once she had found the beautiful house in Wiltshire and driven him there and shown him. But apathy had succeeded rage, and then rage came back, alternating with periods of deep depression. He sat about all day or he paced. In the evenings he

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watched television indiscriminately. His doctor suggested this holiday, two weeks in the Aegean, before the move.

"I don't care," he said. "If you like. It's all one to me. I'll never get her voice out of my head, not a word of apology, no shame."

He rolled up the map of the Garden of Eden and she packed it in his suitcase. What became of the postcards she didn't know until she saw him studying one of them on the plane.

They moved house two weeks after their return. It was only his second visit to the house, only the second time he had walked through these spacious rooms and down the steps from the terrace onto the lawn to look across at the seven acres which were now his. Wasn't this better than living in a North London terrace, taking the Northern Line daily to a Docklands office? She wasn't so tactless as to ask him directly. It put heart into her to see him explore the place, pronounce later that evening that it wasn't so bad, that it was a relief to breathe fresh air.

She busied herself getting the place straight, unpacking the boxes, deciding where this piece of furniture and that should go. Two men arrived to hang the new curtains. Another brought the chandelier, holland-wrapped, tied up with string. He hung it in the drawing room and he hung the pictures. David hung up his framed map of the Garden of Eden in the room that was going to be his study. Then he asked the man to hang a much bigger picture he had and which he wanted in the dining room. Rosemary saw, to her surprise, that it was the map again, but blown up to three times its size (and therefore rather vague and blurred) in an ornate gilt frame.

"I had it done," David said. "Last week. I found a place where they photocopy things to any size you want."

She was overjoyed. If she felt a tremor of unease it was a tiny thing, brought about, surely, by her heightened nervousness and sensitivity to his moods. If she was ever so slightly disturbed by the spectacle of a man of fifty engrossed in a cheap copy of a map of some mythical place . . . But no, it was wonderful to see him returning to his old self, to interest and occupation. He even arranged the furniture in his study, put his books out on the shelves. By nine next morning he was out in the garden and, later in the day, off in the car to a nursery where there was a chance of finding some particular shrub he wanted.

After they had been in the new place a week, she realised he hadn't once mentioned the Chief Executive or her mouth or her blue suit or her voice. So this, apparently, was the solution. Not the holiday or the doctors drugs or even kindness but the move to somewhere new and different. His days, which had been empty, gradually became busy and filled. He followed a pattern, gardening in the morning and in the afternoon going out in the car and

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returning with books. Some came from a library, some he bought. She paid them very little attention. It was enough to know that he was reading again after not opening a book of any kind for months. Then one day he asked her if they had a Bible in the house.

She was astonished. Neither of them had religious leanings. "Your old school Bible is somewhere. Shall I look for it?"

"I will," he said, and then, "I want to look something up."

He found the Bible and was soon immersed in it. Perhaps he was about to undergo some sort of conversion. This house was his road to Damascus. Disquiet returned in a small niggling way and when he was outside mowing the lawn next day she looked at the library books and the books he had bought. Every one of them was concerned in some respect or other with the Garden of Eden. There was a scholarly examination of the book of Genesis, an American Fundamentalist work, a modern novel called *Rib Into Woman,* Milton's *Paradise Lost,* and several others. Well, she had hoped he would take up a hobby, that he would study something or collect something, and what it appeared he was studying was—paradise.

Presumably, he would tell her about it sooner or later. He would say what the purpose of it was, what he meant to do with it, what he expected to accomplish. They had enough to live on comfortably, he had no need of an earned income, but perhaps he intended to write a book for his own pleasure. She watched him. She didn't ask. Her own life was less busy than it had been in London and it took concentration to find enough to do. She must become involved with village life, she thought, find charity work, develop her own interests. He didn't seem to want her to help in the garden. Meanwhile, she cooked more than she ever had, baked their bread, made jam from the soft fruit. She admitted to herself that she was lonely.

But when, at last, he did tell her, it came as a shock. She said, "I don't understand. I don't know what you mean."

"Just what I say." He had stopped barking at her. He habitually spoke gently now, even dreamily. "It's here. The Garden is here. This is where it is. It's taken me a few weeks to be sure, that's why I've said nothing till now. But now I am absolutely certain. The Garden of Eden is there, outside our windows."

"David," she said, "the Garden of Eden doesn't exist. It never did exist. It is a myth. You know that as well as I do."

He looked at her with narrowed eyes, as if he suspected her mental equilibrium. "Why do you say that?"

"Believing in it as a real place is like saying Adam and Eve really existed."

"Why not?" he said.

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"David, I'm not hearing this. You can't be saying this. Listen, people used to believe in it. Then Darwin came along and his theory of evolution, you know that. You know that God, if there is a God, didn't make a man out of whatever it is."

"Dust."

"Well, dust, all right. He didn't take out one of his ribs and make a woman. I mean, it's laughable. Only crazy sects believe that stuff." She stopped, thought. "You're joking, aren't you, you're having me on?"

In a rapt, dreamy tone, as if she hadn't spoken, he said, "It's always been believed that the site of the Garden was somewhere in the Middle East because Genesis mentions the river Euphrates and Ethiopia and Assyria. But, seriously, how could a garden be in Syria and Ethiopia and Iraq all at the same time? The truth is that it was far away, in a place they knew nothing of, a distant place beyond the confines of the known world . . ."

"Wiltshire," she said.

"Please don't mock," he said. "Cynicism doesn't suit you. Come outside and I'll show you."

He took the Bible with him and one of the postcards. The area of their land he led her to comprised the old orchard, a lawn, and the water garden, through which two spring-fed streams flowed. She saw that the lawn had been mown and the banks of the streams tidied up. It was very pretty, a lush, mature garden in which unusual plants grew and where fruit trees against the old wall bore ripening plums and pears.

"There, you see," he said, referring to his Bible, "is the river called Pison, that is it which compasseth the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold." His eyes flashed. There was sweat on his upper lip. "And the name of the second river is Gihon, and the third Hiddekel, and the fourth river is Euphrates."

She could only see two, not much more than trickles, flowing over English stones among English water buttercups. He turned and beckoned to her in his old peremptory way, but his voice was still measured and gentle. His voice was as if he was explaining something obvious to a slow-witted child.

"There," he said, "the Tree of Life. Sometimes we call it the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

He pointed to it and led her up under its branches, a big old apple tree, laden with small green apples. When first she saw the house she remembered, it had been in blossom.

"Mustn't eat those, eh?"

His smile and his short bark of laughter frightened her. She felt entirely at a loss. This was the man she had been married to for twenty years, the practical, clever businessman. How had he known those words, how had he known where to look for this—

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this web of nonsense? She put out her hand and touched the tree. She hung onto it, leaned against it, for she was afraid she might faint.

"I wondered when I first discovered it," he said, "if we were being given a second chance."

She didn't know what he meant. She closed her eyes, bowed her head. When she felt she could breathe again and that strength was returning, she looked for him, but he was gone. She made her way back to the house. Later, after he had gone to bed, she sat downstairs, wondering what to do. It couldn't be right for him to be left to go on like this. But in the morning when she woke and he woke, when they encountered each other on adjoining pillows, then across the breakfast table, he seemed his normal self. He talked about taking on a gardener, the place was too much for him alone. Would she like the dining room redecorated? She had said she disliked the wallpaper. And perhaps it was time to invite the neighbours in—if you could call people living half a mile away neighbours—have a small drinks party, acquaint themselves with the village.

She summoned up all the courage she had. "That was a game you were playing last evening, wasn't it? You weren't serious?"

He laughed. "You evidently didn't think I was." It was hardly an answer. "I dreamt of that bitch," he said. "She came in wearing that ghastly blue suit that showed her fat knees and told me to clear my desk. She was eating an apple—did I tell you that?"

"In your dream, do you mean?"

He was instantly angry. "No, I don't mean that. In reality is what I mean. She came into my office with an apple in her hand, she was eating an apple. I told you."

She shook her head. He had never told her that, she would have remembered. Next day the new gardener started. She was afraid David would say something to him about the Garden of Eden. When neighbours came in for drinks a week later she was afraid David would say something to them. He didn't. It seemed that conversation on this subject was reserved to her alone. With other people he was genial, bland, civilised. In the evenings, alone with her, he spent his time compiling a list of the plants indigenous to Eden, balm and pomegranate, coriander and hyssop. He took her into the fruit garden and showed her the fig tree that grew up against the wall, pointing out its hand-shaped leathery leaves and saying that they could stitch the leaves together and make themselves aprons.

She looked that up in Genesis and found the reference. Then she went to seek advice.

The doctor didn't take her seriously. Or he didn't take David's obsession seriously. He said he would review the tranquillizers he

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was already prescribing for David, and this he did—with startling effect. David's enthusiasm seemed to wane, he became quiet and preoccupied, busied himself in other areas of the grounds, returned to his old interest of reading biographies. He joined the golf club. He no longer spoke of the Chief Executive and her blue suit and her apple. The only thing to disquiet Rosemary was the snake.

"I've just seen an adder," he told her when he came in for his lunch. "Curled up under the fig tree."

She said nothing, just looked at him.

"It might have been a grass snake, I'm not sure, but it was certainly a snake."

"Is it still there?"

There came a flash of the bad temper she hadn't seen for weeks. "How do I know if it's still there? Come and see."

Not a snake, but a shed snake skin. Nothing could have made Rosemary happier. She was so certain the snake was part of his delusion, but he had seen a real snake, or a real snake's skin. He was well again, it was over, whatever it had been.

The summer had been long and hot and the fruit crop was spectacular. First the raspberries and gooseberries, then peaches and plums. Rosemary made jam and jelly, she even bottled fruit the way her mother used to. None of it must be wasted. David picked the pears before they were ripe, wrapped each one individually in tissue paper and stored them in boxes. The days were long and golden, the evenings mild and the air scented with ripe fruit. David often walked round the grounds at dusk but that was the merest coincidence, it had nothing to do with the Lord God walking in the garden at the cool of the day.

The big tree was a Cox, David thought, a Cox's Orange Pippin, considered by many even today to be the finest English apple. It was laden with fruit. They used an apple picker with a ten-foot handle but they had to put a ladder up into the highest branches. Rosemary went up it because she was the lighter of them and the more agile. He held the ladder and she picked.

If her fears hadn't been allayed, if she hadn't put the whole business of the map and the Garden of Eden behind her—and, come to that, the Chief Executive in her bright blue suit—she might have been more cautious. She might have been wary. She had forgotten that cryptic remark of his when he said that they—meaning mankind?—might have been given a second chance. She had come to see his delusion as the temporary madness of a man humiliated and driven beyond endurance. So she climbed down the ladder with her basket of shiny red and gold fruit and, taking one in her hand, a flawless ripe apple, held it out to him and said, "Look at that, isn't that absolutely perfect? Try it, have a bite."

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His face grew dark red and swollen. He shouted, "You won't do it a second time, woman, you won't bring evil into the world a second time!"

He lashed out at her with the apple picker, struck her on the side of the head, on the shoulder, again on her head. She fell to the ground and the apples spilled out and rolled everywhere. Her screams fetched the gardener who got there just in time, pulled David off, wrested the bloodstained apple picker out of his hands.

Rosemary was in hospital for a long time, but not so long as David. When she was better, she went to see him. He was in the day room, quiet and subdued, watching a game show on television. When he saw her, he picked up the first weapon that came to hand, a table lamp, brandished it and flung himself upon her, cursing her and crying that he would multiply her sorrow. They advised her not to go back and she never did.

She stayed in the house on her own, she liked it. After all, she had chosen it in the first place. But she took the maps of the Garden of Eden out of their frames and gave the frames to the village jumble sale. In the spring she had the apple tree cut down and made a big fishpond where it had stood. Fed by the streams he had called Pison and Gihon, Hiddekel and Euphrates, it was an ideal home for her Koi carp, which became the envy of the county. ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

SHOPPING FOR THE DEAD

by Donald Olson

Lunch at the Town Club found Ralph Trantum in that expansive mood he always affected when meeting up with one of the "old boys" from his college days in Bloomington. On this occasion, however, it didn't take Eddie Grimshaw more than two vodka martinis to detect behind Ralph's jovial air a shadow of distress.

"So tell me, old man, if business is booming, what's eating you? Can't fool an old pal, you know." Eddie said this with that sly, insinuating smile Ralph had never been able to resist, even in those faraway days of campus hijinks and misdemeanors which seemed to foreshadow Ralph's often less-than-scrupulous business deals.

Now, as then, Ralph was happy to unburden himself to his friend. "If you must know, it's Dorothy," he said with an air of sudden deflation.

"Not well, is she?" Eddie signaled for another round.

"No, no, nothing like that. Sound as a bell, Dottie. Always has been. It's this lunatic business she's got herself involved in."

Eddie grinned. "Sick of the kitchen, is she? Midlife spreading of

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the wings? Or do we mean monkey business?"

"Don't be stupid."

"Sorry. Forgot. That's always been your weakness. You still got that little bit on the side? What was her name? Cindy?"

"Ginger." Ralph had always regretted spilling the beans about *that* to Eddie one bibulous night at a convention in Atlantic City. "Forget about Ginger. Tell me, Eddie, how'd you like to come home at night and find the dining-room table littered with brochures from funeral homes, catalogs of coffins and gravestones, and price lists of funeral floral arrangements? Don't laugh. Dorothy's come up with this service business. Calls it 'catering to the bereaved.' Shopping for the dead, that's what I call it. Pretty sick, eh?"

Donald Olson's stories arrive at *EQMM* in bunches, often six or seven at a time. That's because the author likes to let his work sit for a while after finishing it, before sending it off. If he still likes a story weeks after completion, it will form part of a package for us. We're sometimes curious about the stories that don't make it, for the ones that do are always good. ¶

"Weird. Never heard of such a thing." A teasing smile played over Eddie's lips as he raised his glass.

"It ain't funny. The idea stinks. But would you believe there are actually well-heeled idiots who would rather hire someone else to do the dirty work when it comes to handling arrangements for their deceased relatives? Oh yes, believe me. Or sometimes lawyers and estate executors hire Dorothy to take charge. Everything from buying the flowers to choosing the casket and hiring the preacher. The whole package. She actually runs an ad in the paper. I told her she was nuts. But you know what? She's been getting more clients than an orthopedist at a ski resort. It's demeaning. It lacks dignity. You wouldn't believe the ribbing I take at lodge meetings."

Eddie could not keep the amusement out of his voice. "She know how you feel about it?"

"Oh, she just laughs. 'At least it's honest work.' That's what she said to me. Implying you know what. She never has understood that in my line of work you've sometimes got to cut corners to beat out the competition. You mentioned Ginger. I wish you hadn't, but what the hell. I tell you, Eddie, Ginger's got more on the ball than Dorothy ever had. I often think I should've married her." Flushed with drink, Ralph's face acquired a look of brooding discontent as he stroked his dyed moustache, much thicker than the hair on his head.

"Well, so what, if it makes Dottie happy. Nothing you can do

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about it." Eddie rather suspected that this flap of Ralph's over his wife's new interest was rooted in some deeper dissatisfaction.

"There must be some way to discourage her," Ralph insisted. "You were always the clever one, Eddie. Tell me what to do."

Eddie wagged his head and tried to look wise.

Dorothy Trantum was a bright-eyed little woman with discreetly tinted red hair, a cheerful disposition, and a sense of proportion that allowed her to regard death and its trappings with none of her husband's morbid distaste. She found nothing socially inappropriate in ministering to the needs of the bereaved. If she could ease their distress at a time of mourning and at the same time give herself an outlet for her energies, what was the harm? She found Ralph's attitude of petulant disapproval childish and illogical, and like Eddie Grimshaw, she found something bogus about it.

On a certain autumn afternoon, a widow in mourning appeared on the doorstep after calling earlier for an appointment. She wore a plain black dress with a white shawl collar and cuffs. Had she worn the appropriate headgear rather than the black hat with its fringe of veil she might have passed for a nun. Her face was pale and bare of makeup. Thick-lensed glasses in round frames seemed to magnify dark-lashed brown eyes.

She offered a gloved hand and said, "Mrs. Trantum? I'm Julia Leavenwood. Mrs. Francis Leavenwood?"

"Yes, do come in."

"How lovely," said the widow, looking approvingly around the living room. "You're clearly a woman of taste. That's reassuring."

"May I offer you coffee, or a sherry perhaps?"

"Sherry would be lovely. I'm avoiding coffee, the state my nerves are in."

"You said on the phone your husband died in a motor accident?"

"In Mexico, where he was engaged in anthropological research for the university. His body will be flown home for burial. Here, I mean, not to Elkhart. Francis often told me his happiest days were spent growing up here on the South Side. He made me promise he'd be buried here. Francis has no family. Only me and a couple of cousins. Mrs. Trantum, I can't tell you what a relief it would be if you could handle all the arrangements."

"I believe you said a doctor referred you to me?"

"Dr. Greeg, yes, in Elkhart. He'd seen your ad in the local paper while he was here. I'm only now recovering from a breakdown and this frightful accident has left me feeling utterly helpless. Dr. Greeg thought there could be no harm in my contacting you."

Dorothy, already well versed in the language of bereavement, uttered the usual condolences. "I should be more than happy to help you."

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Mrs. Leavenwood took a hanky from her bag and dabbed at her eyes. "I want no expense spared in giving Francis a proper send-off. The best funeral home. An expensive casket. Masses of flowers, although it will be a small, private service. All this has happened so suddenly, Francis's affairs are in something of a muddle. My accountant has all that in hand. As soon as the insurance settlement is forthcoming I shall settle my account with you—if that's convenient."

"Entirely. But we haven't discussed my fee."

"I'm sure it won't be unreasonable. And well worth the trouble you're sparing me. Francis will have left me more than amply provided for."

Dorothy fetched a form from her desk in the corner. "This is my standard contract covering services to be rendered."

Mrs. Leavenwood glanced at it and signed her name with a flourish. Dorothy proceeded to explain what information she required and for the next twenty minutes drew from the widow her ideas as to the type of arrangements she wished Dorothy to handle. Having been told when the mortuary might expect receipt of the body, Dorothy assured her new client that she could safely leave all the details in Dorothy's hands.

"I shall be returning to Elkhart immediately after the funeral," said Mrs. Leavenwood, pulling on her gloves. "Meanwhile, I'll be staying with friends here in the city. Let me give you their phone number in case you wish to get in touch."

Ralph's reaction to her news about Mrs. Leavenwood was quite what Dorothy had expected.

"What the hell's happened to family values?" he blustered, reaching into the drinks cabinet. "Bad enough when the old folks are dumped in nursing homes to spare their families the bother of caring for them. But not to want to be bothered with putting them in the ground, my God, what's the world coming to?"

Dorothy saw no point in challenging such a hypocritical effusion. Ralph, she knew, was just the type of tight-fisted unsentimental man who would dump her in a nursing home without a qualm. She was well aware that it was the success of her enterprise that aroused his pique.

"Some people, Ralph, are not psychologically equipped to deal with the stress of grief. If you'd met Mrs. Leavenwood you'd know what I mean."

"Well, I don't like it. It's against my principles. It's as bad as my having to tell people my wife takes in washing."

"I'm making money, Ralph. How can you object to that?"

He snorted. "Pin money. Big deal. Speaking of which, how big a deposit did this Mrs. What's-her-name plunk down?"

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"I never ask for a deposit, you know that. It's not as if she's buying a car from me."

"She's a perfect stranger. An out-of-towner. Cried on your shoulder, did she? You've got a lot to learn about business, my girl."

Ralph lit a cigar and sat puffing it in angry silence, a silence he maintained throughout the meal. Dorothy watched him shovel down the food as she tried to remember what he was like when they were first married. Had the seeds of bigotry and selfishness and male chauvinism always been there? What had happened to her romantic illusions? Rather to her surprise she realized that she was fast losing the fear of what would become of her should they ever separate. She rejoiced in her new spirit of independence, the knowledge that she could make it on her own if it were ever necessary. Was this what bothered Ralph, rather than any social or moral distaste for what she was doing?

Dorothy's first step was to sit down with Mr. Bly, a director of the Powers-Bly Funeral Home with whom she had done business before. Mrs. Leavenwood had specified the best of everything. Mr. Bly was happy to oblige. In the showroom they selected a top-of-the-line bronze casket and vault. As they stood admiring it Dorothy tried to picture Ralph in this situation. What would he choose for her? The next best thing to a pine box? The date and time of the funeral for Francis Leavenwood would be decided once the widow had apprised Dorothy of when to expect arrival of the body.

From the funeral home, Dorothy drove to Lakeview Cemetery on the South Side where, with Mr. Feather, the superintendent, she chose a burial site, there being no family plot. According to Mrs. Leavenwood, the family had moved to Elkhart when Francis was nineteen.

On from there to the monument company situated across the street from the cemetery, where Dorothy picked out an upright monument in pink granite carved with lilies and acanthus leaves. By now a great deal of expense had been incurred. Since venturing upon her business, Dorothy had been astonished to discover just how costly a first-class funeral could be.

The following day, Dorothy spent a pleasant half-hour with Father O'Donnell, the rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church. As Mrs. Leavenwood had confessed that neither she nor her husband was affiliated with any religious denomination, Dorothy had seen no harm in throwing a little business to her own pastor. She gave him what little information the widow had supplied about her husband's background and interests, confident that Father O'Donnell would rise to the occasion despite his not having known the deceased.

"Father Paul," said Dorothy as she was about to depart, "tell me

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frankly, do you think what I do for these people is in any way not—respectable?"

The rector responded with a quizzical smile. "Whatever do you mean, not respectable? You fulfill a Christian need with both tact and compassion. There's certainly no shame in that."

"My husband doesn't agree. He finds it offensive to his pride, I mean. As if I'm exploiting other people's grief."

"Rubbish, my dear. He should be proud of what you're doing. I'd tell him so myself if he ever came to church."

"Which isn't likely," said Dorothy. "I'm afraid Ralph is a devoted materialist."

"You've been married a long time, I believe?"

"Too long, I sometimes think. We've become like strangers sharing the same house. My little business has given me a sense of my own worth. I think Ralph resents that."

The rector smiled sadly. "Husbands often do, I've found. But you mustn't feel guilty."

"Oh, I don't. Not anymore."

"I'm telling you for the last time, Dorothy," proclaimed Ralph as he was getting ready that evening to go to a lodge meeting. At least that's where he said he was going, although Dorothy was beginning to wonder about the frequency of all these lodge meetings. And was it really necessary to drench himself in cologne for a night out with his lodge brothers? Not that Dorothy actually suspected him of anything irregular. He was much too cheap and unromantic to get involved with another woman. "You're going to make a damn fool of yourself," he ranted, "and of me, if you persist in this lunacy. It's obscene. Gruesome."

"Good gracious, Ralph, you make it sound as if I'm actually digging graves."

"You listen to me," he retorted, "or you'll be digging your own grave."

"And what's that supposed to mean? You'll disown me?"

"Take it any way you like."

These explosions of self-righteous indignation simply didn't ring true to Dorothy. They were out of character. The phrase "mental anguish" crossed her mind. Was it remotely possible that Ralph wanted to get rid of her and thought such a plea might sway the opinion of a divorce court?

On Monday morning Dorothy heard from Julia Leavenwood. She apologized for not calling sooner. "I've had a million things on my mind. Lawyers and all that, you know. What I'm calling for now is to let you know that Francis's body will be flown home tomorrow and will arrive by train in the city Wednesday morning. Have you

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had time to complete all the arrangements?"

Dorothy assured her that everything was well in hand. "You'll be traveling with the body?"

"Yes. Along with Francis's two cousins. Quite elderly. The last of his line." She gave Dorothy the train's arrival time. "You've been a godsend, Mrs. Trantum. I can't tell you."

Dorothy saw before her a long string of widows and widowers and relatives, of bankers and lawyers and executors, who would employ her services now that she was establishing a reputation as a caring and reliable provider. She would soon need an office and someone to assist her.

She called Mr. Bly and confirmed with him plans for the receipt of the body and scheduling of services, and after calling the florist she phoned Mary Jane and made plans to meet her for a late lunch at the Green Farm Tearoom.

Mary Jane was Dorothy's age, a childless divorcée whose husband had left her for another woman. She and Dorothy had been at school together.

"What a whiz you are, Dottie," said Mary Jane, nibbling her shrimp bisque. "And you such a mouse at school."

"Maybe it's about time this mouse learned to roar."

"And Ralph? Is he still roaring?"

"When he's not sulking." She told Mary Jane about the Leavenwood commission. "You know what Ralph said? Stop what I'm doing or I'll be digging my own grave."

"How typically Ralph. I think he's scared you're going to become too independent. Serves him right."

Thinking of how often Mary Jane was at loose ends, Dorothy said, "If business continues to expand I'll be needing some assistance. Care to apply for the job?"

"Honey, you need but ask."

The phone was ringing when Dorothy came into the house after picking up what she called her "funeral dress" at the cleaners. Mr. Bly was on the line.

"I thought I'd better call you straightaway," he said, his tone more than ordinarily somber. "The train came in but not Mr. Leavenwood. Or Mrs. Leavenwood. Have you heard from her?"

"No. What could have gone wrong, I wonder?"

"Can you reach her? I'll have to know as soon as possible if we're forced to cancel."

"I have the number of some friends she was staying with here. I'll give them a call."

A woman answered. Dorothy explained why she was calling.

"Sorry," came the reply. "You must have been given the wrong number. I've never heard of a Julia Leavenwood."

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Dorothy's initial reaction was one of dazed bewilderment. There had to be a logical explanation. Julia Leavenwood was a real person. She had sat in this very room and shed real tears. A misunderstanding about the train, perhaps?

Dorothy called directory assistance in Elkhart. Nothing listed for a Francis or Julia Leavenwood. Nor for a Dr. Greeg.

Dorothy put down the phone, still unwilling to believe she could have been the victim of some bizarre hoax. But what else could she believe? She recalled Ralph's derisive response to her news about Mrs. Leavenwood. *How big a deposit did she plunk down? . . . You've got a lot to learn about business, my girl.* How could she bear the humiliation of admitting Ralph had been right?

Mary Jane could offer little consolation when Dorothy called her. "Now just calm down, honey. Surely you can't be held financially responsible."

"Can't I? I'm not so sure. And how could people ever trust me again after being made such a fool of? I guess I should have listened to Ralph."

"Now stop that. Chalk it up to experience. Next time you won't be so trusting."

"But it's crazy, Mary Jane. Why would anyone play such a mean joke on me?"

The answer was not long in coming. Ralph arrived home in a mood of alcoholic euphoria, which usually meant he'd pulled off some business coup he couldn't wait to brag about.

Blind to the look of distress on Dorothy's face, he told her to go upstairs and make herself pretty. "Eddie Grimshaw's in town. He's invited us to have dinner with him at the Carousel. You remember Eddie. Hell of a nice guy."

Dorothy stood at the foot of the stairs, watching him in mute despair. She knew there was no point in withholding from him what had happened. Let him punish her with all the sarcasm he could muster. Didn't she deserve it?

Instead, after listening to her with an air almost of indifference, he poured himself a drink he clearly did not need and said calmly, unreproachfully: "Poor old Dottie. No point in blubbering about it." For Dorothy had ended her story with a tearful catch in her voice. "It was time someone taught you a lesson. Sorry it had to be me."

Dorothy stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"You were set up, sweetie. It was the only way I could make you see reason."

The tears stopped as if suddenly frozen. "Ralph, what are you telling me? What do you know about this?"

He loosened his tie and shrugged off his jacket, revealing dark sweat stains under his arms as he flung them out in a boisterous

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gesture of triumph. His face had that moist, greasy look it always had when he'd been drinking far too much.

"There never was any Mrs. Leavenwood. A bit of playacting by a friend of mine. And you fell for it. Swallowed it, hook, line, and sinker. You were suckered, Dottie. Get the message? You were cut out to be a housewife, nothing more. Now get upstairs and change." He crossed to the drinks cabinet and fumbled among the bottles. "You need a snifter or two to put you in a party mood."

Dorothy turned swiftly and started up the stairs, Ralph following her, clutching a bottle.

At the top of the stairs she swung around. "Stay away from me, Ralph. Just stay away."

"Now, now, don't be a spoilsport. I did it for your own good."

On the top step he stumbled and grabbed for the banister. In a rage such as she'd never felt in her life, never expected to feel, Dorothy seized the bottle from his hand and swung it viciously at Ralph's head. His eyes flew wide open. His jaw sagged. As he staggered Dorothy gave him a vigorous push in the chest. He toppled backward down the long flight of stairs.

After the funeral, Eddie Grimshaw came up to Dorothy as she was leaving the grave site on Mary Jane's arm.

"Bearing up okay, Dottie?" he murmured.

"I'm bearing up just fine, Eddie, thank you."

"Terrible accident. They say most of them do happen in the home. Poor old Ralph. He'd been hitting the sauce a bit too heavily lately. I warned him, last time we met."

Dorothy turned for a final look at the coffin, brightly illuminated in the midday sun. Maybe she could use the Leavenwood monument as well; it was not yet inscribed. Why not? Ralph would be paying for it.

Her gaze drifted toward a woman standing alone near the grave as the other mourners dispersed. Although Dorothy didn't recognize the woman's face behind dark glasses and under the wide-brimmed hat, there was something familiar about the black dress she wore, the white shawl collar and wide cuffs. What was it Ralph had said? *A bit of playacting by a friend of mine.*

Dorothy had neither the will nor the heart to confront the woman. She was eager to put it all behind her. She'd had enough of death and funerals.

As she gripped Mary Jane's arm and moved away, it may have been the impression of all those flowers that created in her mind a sudden vision of orange blossoms and white lace, of three-tiered cakes and happy couples dancing under a striped marquee.

Catering weddings! Well, why not? It was at least something to think about. ●

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THE ASSASSIN'S LIST

by Andrew S. Taylor

A 26-year-old graduate of Sarah Lawrence College, Andrew S. Taylor is one of the youngest writers *EQMM* has debuted. Though he is originally from Boston, he has lived all over the northeastern U. S. and in Florence, Italy. His extensive travels through Europe, including Innsbruck, have helped shape his fiction. In this tale the setting is critical to the plot. ¶

The street had no vanishing point. Like many of the streets in the center of Innsbruck, it followed a gentle curve and eventually disappeared from view four or five blocks ahead. A modest traffic of ruddy-faced bicyclists and long-haired, backpacking teenagers constantly slipped in and out of view. The street was called Honigstrasse, and the assassin knew that somewhere, up around the bend, he would find his target.

He leaned against a lamppost, eager to reexamine his instructions and have a smoke. It was his first assignment, and he wanted perfection.

The first thing he pulled from his jacket was a cigarette case, covered in a floral-patterned green felt. Opened, it revealed four filterless cigarettes, each of a distinctly different size and shape. He selected from the four a Turkish brand, rolled in thick yellow paper, which, when viewed from either end, presented a two-cornered, ovoid shape like a human eye rather than a circle. The cigarette therefore sat more comfortably between otherwise closed lips.

He replaced the case and lit the cigarette with an Ohio blue-tip match which had been floating in the bottom of his right coat pocket for days. Relief spread through his veins upon the first inhalation. Satisfied with his selection, he reached for the instructions, which were folded and tucked away in the same inner pocket that held the cigarette case. He slid them out and unfolded them.

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Scribbled on clean bond paper, they read:

599b Honigstrasse. Apartment 07.
The weaponry is in the kitchen. It does not leave the kitchen.
Wait until dusk.
Watch for the beehive in the window.
Shoot the red hat at absolute first sight.
You must remain unseen.
Remainder of payment is forthcoming upon successful completion.
Faith.

This last word had been added, no doubt, to reassure him that any vagueness in the written instructions would be clarified when the proper time and place presented itself. Once inside the apartment, the location of the "beehive in the window" would become obvious, and the "red hat" which was to appear in said window would surely be a distinct target at the hour of dusk.

Reassured, he replaced the instructions and finished his cigarette while carefully examining the fiery white Alpine peaks that surrounded the city in which he stood. When he finished, he tossed the butt aside and proceeded to walk down Honigstrasse.

Faith. He recalled the gloved hand that had whisked the envelope into his pocket as he walked down the appointed avenue on the appointed evening, as per arrangement with the anonymous voice on the telephone, referred to him by an anonymous postcard, found in the post-office box whose number was given to him . . . and so on. The chain of anonymity contained many links, reaching back into the past and across international borders. No matter. The pay he'd been promised was tremendous.

The numbers ticked past him on the sides of his vision as he walked. In this narrow street, lined with high buildings, the cool mountain air bit at him. 523, 527 . . . he glanced up at the mountain ridge, where fiery white sparks played around the sharp rock edges.

599 was a flower shop, dimly lit, and closed for the lunch hour. Just past this, nestled between 599 and 603, was 599b, a small blue door made out of three thick planks unevenly held together by two small crosspieces. The street number had been crudely etched into the door—quite recently, it seemed, as the wood shone brightly beneath the paint.

He knocked. Hearing no answer, he reached down to press the thumb lever on the dark metal handle, and paused, slightly startled, as his fingertips were met with a ticklish sensation.

What was this? He pulled away, just slightly. A spider's web, and oil . . . his fingers were now stained and sticky with these two

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unexpected, incongruous substances. And had he even touched the handle? The door already hung open about half an inch.

Holding his right hand in front of him, splay-fingered and rigid, he nudged the door open with his foot, slowly. The edge of the door, which had been pressed against the inside of the doorframe, showed the chipped remains of previous coats of paint: green, red, gray, yellow, another green. The blue ended nearly an inch from the edge of the door. Even stranger, the inner rim of the frame showed an uneven smattering of blue—perhaps the leakage from the edge of a thick, somewhat worn paintbrush. Had the last person to paint this door not even opened it? Had they simply come by, like a thief in the night, changed the color, and promptly left?

Somewhat angrily, he pushed the door open wide. A worn stairway of thick granite slabs ascended into the diffuse light from an unseen window above.

He stepped inside as another gust of mountain wind came whistling past the door, which rattled on its hinges and was suddenly sucked closed behind him. The sudden change in air pressure pushed painfully against his eardrums, and his hands instinctively moved towards his head. But he had to be careful. His fingers had been dirtied with a sticky brown goo. He did not want to get it in his hair. His frustration building, he looked around for some forgotten rag. A browning newspaper, neatly folded, sat in the dark alcove next to the stairway. He grabbed it with his left hand, pulled at the umlaut-speckled front page, and let the interior fall away. He inspected the paper for insect pests before he smeared his soiled hand against it. A few wipes and most of the substance came off, though some of the unpleasant stickiness remained. No matter. He would now search for apartment 07.

The first flight of stairs ended in a windowless landing, but a 180-degree turn took him up a second flight that would bring him to a dark green door with a brass doorknob. A window in the west wall, perpendicular to the door, was the only source of light.

He began to ascend—and heard voices. From behind the door, a man and a woman spat thick, Germanic syllables at one another. He paused on the stairway, not wanting to retreat, but uncertain as to whether he should remain visible.

The door opened, just a few inches at first. Yellow light seeped around the edge. The male voice said something slowly, with a sense of finality. The door swung open the rest of the way and a figure bounded out.

The man was short, in his mid forties, and balding. He was barrel-chested—in fact, sort of barrel-shaped all around. He was still dressing himself, struggling with the buttons on his shirt as he stepped heavily down the stairway. The woman emerged from the

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doorway when the man was nearly halfway down the flight of steps; she was dressed to go out in a long fur coat. She watched indifferently as the man descended.

The assassin waited, half-crouching on the stairway. The barrel-man sniffed loudly as he breezed by and disappeared around the corner.

He stood up straight, feeling awkward in the sudden company. The woman wore a moderate amount of makeup and had silky, raven-black hair which was bound behind her head, save for a few untidy streams of it which trailed down her jaw line and rested on the collar of her coat. Her right hand fidgeted with the buckle of a small white leather purse, which was slung over her shoulder. She smiled when she saw him.

"You don't live here," she said in English. "Are you waiting for me? Or do you just make a habit of staring at people with a wounded expression?"

He stood more rigidly, then began to walk up the stairs again, attempting to seem as casual as possible. "I was making my way up, and I heard an argument." He glanced back and forth from her face to the stairs as he spoke. "I was simply worried that there might be a serious altercation."

She nodded and shrugged. That sounds plausible enough, she seemed to say, then began to rummage through her purse. "Do you have a light?" she asked.

He felt around the inside of his jacket as she drew out a cigarette. The pocket where he kept his lighter had developed a gaping hole. Fortunately, he remembered the spare matches that he kept near his wrist, sewn into his jacket lining. Hidden from even the most thorough of pat-downs: an old army trick. Feeling himself quite the magician, he slipped one out. Pink-tipped, guaranteed to light from any surface. Moisture resistant.

"You are correct, ma'am. I do not live here. I am here to recover some paperwork for an acquaintance who lives in number seven." He struck the match against the wall. It flared violently. "A business acquaintance, who is presently out of the country. He has given me a key,"—as he said this, he realized that he had no such key—"and I must collect the papers from his desk." He held the match between forefinger and thumb and cupped his left hand around the flame. She leaned forward. The end of the match shook as she breathed the cigarette—a white, filtered brand—to life.

She looked up at him pointedly. That's enough, she seemed to say. I'm fine now. He shook the match out, dropped it, and then realized that he wanted to smoke as well.

"You should tell your friend," she began, with her arm propped up so that the cherry-tip of her cigarette was at face-level, "that his apartment has been condemned for several months."

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He pulled out his felt-covered case, opened it, and selected a Pall Mall unfiltered, the strongest cigarette he carried. He snapped the case shut, loudly, and stabbed the thick cigarette between his lips. She made him nervous. He could not look into her eyes for more than a second at a time.

"Allow me," she said. A butane lighter with a steady blue flame appeared in front of his face. He leaned forward, his face near her fist. He inhaled deeply. It was not until he pulled away that he did the double take—seeing her lighter and remembering the match he had struck for her.

"Why have you come here?" she asked, blowing smoke sideways.

He looked into her face. He forced himself to keep his gaze from wandering. The pupils of her eyes were dilated to a size he had never seen in any kind of daylight, so much so that the brown iris formed only a thin, delicate ring around an ocean of black glass. He inhaled smoke once, twice, taking in far too much.

"Do you want a trick?" She spoke more quietly now, indicating the door through which she had come with a casual tilt of the head.

"No," he snapped. "That's not why I came here. Had I wanted to, don't you think I would have come up with a better story?"

"Really? You were making it up? I just thought you were in the wrong building."

He began to flush with anger and humiliation. This was not good form, not at all.

The woman grinned at him arrogantly.

"I wasn't lying." He licked his lips. "You simply implied that I was." There was a lump in his throat. He swallowed painfully. "I can lie when I need to."

"Come now." She reached forward with her free hand and began to gently caress the back of his neck. "I don't care one way or the other." She leaned in close to him, pulling him into her aura of warmth and smoke. "You're here, aren't you?" She pulled his head to one side and whispered into his left ear. "I could give a rat's ass as to what you're doing here." Each syllable entered his head as a distinct tendril of air.

He was starting to reel with the strength of the cigarette. He put his free hand to his forehead. She pushed it away almost instantly and pulled his mouth to her and kissed him deeply. Her tongue was warm, and spiced with the flavor of tobacco. The kiss was long, elaborate, and almost vulgar. When she eventually pulled away, he found himself overcome with dizziness.

He stumbled forward, pushing her against the wall next to the apartment door, which still hung open. Unfazed, she looked directly at him. Even in the direct sunlight which poured in through the window, her eyes were bottomless dark holes.

He had dropped his cigarette somewhere, and his wrists were

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now pressed against the woman's shoulders. He opened his mouth to speak, but did not. She watched him, waiting without expectation.

He let his arms fall around her body, and began to kiss her throat. Her fingertips pressed the back of his neck, and stroked him gently. Another wave of dizziness hit him, and he began to fall, slowly, to his knees. He slid his arms up underneath her coat and felt, in the snug interior, the warmth of her body beneath a thin, silken dress. As he kissed her stomach, her other hand rested on the top of his head. He hunched lower, knelt, and lifted the short dress. He kissed and caressed her thigh. He moved slowly, biting and nuzzling her musculature through a microscopic layer of industrial fabric. Every few moments or so, her hand would leave the top of his head and she would inhale deeply. Then the hand would return, whilst the other continued to delicately caress the nape of his neck.

He tried to move upwards, intending to kiss along the thigh until . . . But what was he thinking? His funds would remain limited until he successfully performed the task. He closed his mouth and rested his forehead against her hipbone.

"I'm sorry," he said, speaking into her thigh, "but I really can't afford this."

The hand disappeared from the top of his head. The other remained on his neck.

Inhale. Exhale. "That's fine. You haven't bought anything yet." She tapped the back of his skull with her fingers and gently pulled away from him. She smoothed out her dress and pulled the coat closed again. It wasn't until she did this that he realized how comforting the warmth of her body had been.

Slowly, he stood up. He could see that his cigarette had rolled to the foot of the next flight of stairs. The smoke sputtered in the slight upwards draft, zigzagging in such a way as to almost mimic the shape of the stairway.

The woman tossed her own cigarette to the floor and stomped it out. "How is it outside? Windy?"

"Just a bit."

"I'd better get my cap," she said, and stepped through the apartment door.

He stuffed his hands deep into his coat pockets and clenched them into tight fists as he arched his back, trying to relieve it of pain and tension. Back muscles, he reminded himself, are particularly important during the act of precision shooting. In many conditions, they are crucial for accuracy and balance.

The woman reemerged almost immediately. She wore a pair of black leather gloves. She was tucking her hair into a small, red, woolen cap.

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Red. He blinked and did a double take as she removed her keys to lock the door. *Red.*

The bolt fell into place and she turned to leave. She stopped, amused at his quizzical look. "Yes? Are you having second thoughts?"

"It's your hat. You're very attractive in it."

"Ah," she breathed, and smiled pleasantly. Without explanation, she pulled off the glove from her right hand and reached towards his face. Firmly, she ran her thumb sideways across his lips, then held it in front of him to display a smear of lipstick. "Your business acquaintance may wonder about you," she said coyly, then turned and began to walk down the stairs. "Be careful up there," came her echoing voice. "I've heard that the floor in number seven is unsteady in places. Look out for wires and loose plaster." Her footsteps echoed away down the rest of the stairs, and then came a second painful fluctuation in air pressure as the front door opened and closed.

Silence. He was alone. He began to walk up the third flight of stairs. His lips moved silently as he thought to himself. And what exactly, he asked, constitutes a "hat"? Is a cap a hat? Surely, a real hat must have a brim. Surely, the instructions must be taken as literally as possible. A wool cap is not a hat. *Faith.*

The next landing led, again, into darkness. Just enough light filtered down through the next window, at the top of the fourth flight, so that he could see a small puddle of something oily in the northwest corner of the landing. He dipped an exploratory boot-tip into it, and wiped a small arc. The substance was thick, and made a clicking sound when he removed his foot. In the pale blue light, he began to discern other shapes swimming within it. He bent lower, and saw small, flattened bodies and bent wings. Insects, it seemed, that had drowned in this unknown soup.

He drew away, with disgust, and continued on to the fourth flight of stairs, clicking with each step as he went and unconsciously wiping his hand on his jacket.

And what, he thought now, is "red"? Red is not orange, or russet. Had not her woolen cap been a slightly red-maroon? Just think of all the "red" lipsticks there are! Surely, he would not have to shoot *her.* She had kissed him, after all, with that *pink* tongue, those *rose blossom* lips.

The top of the stairway brought him into a larger, wider landing. There were windows on both the east and the west walls, and two southward apartment doors. The door in front of him was green, with a large brass doorknob like the one below. The number 7, also brass, sat proudly in the center of his vision. He put his hand to the doorknob, then paused. Instructions must be followed exactly, he reminded himself.

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599b Honigstrasse. Apartment 07.

07. Zero-seven.

He pulled his hand back and moved to the other door. It had been painted blue. The brass number had been removed—a "9" judging from the screw-holes—and the number 07 had been crudely carved into the wood.

The doorknob was worn, unclean. He put his hand on it, and then paused.

Shoot the red hat at absolute first sight. You must remain unseen.

What if she *had* been the red hat? This would mean that the integrity of the assignment had already been corrupted on two vital points. To what extent could he trust the rest of the instructions? Should he abandon the task, leave immediately, and forgo payment?

But, of course, there was as yet no *conclusive* evidence that the written instructions had ceased to correspond to reality. The command to "shoot the red hat at absolute first sight" occurred in the seventh sentence, and he had, in physical space, only just arrived at the second. The "red hat" would not be a meaningful designation until he had acquired the *weaponry,* waited until *dusk,* and monitored the *beehive in the window.* Until then, any red or off-red hats, caps, or hairpieces were probably just incidental.

Yet what of remaining unseen? Was this unimportant until after the assassination of the red hat? This seemed implausible, counter-intuitive. Perhaps he should have slipped into the building in the early hours, when no one on the street would have seen him, when no one would be there on the stairway to meet him and talk to him. Would the door, then, have been a different color?

He gripped the doorknob and turned it.

It was locked. This, however, was not a problem for him. Spy though he was not, he had learned more than one way to get past a locked door. This moment called for the Snail, which he kept hidden inside the collar of his coat. By unbuttoning the flap-buttons, he could whisk it out at a moment's notice. It consisted of a small, strawberry-shaped sac, which held a thick wax and two long, hollow cords which sprouted from the top in opposite directions. The thinner of the cords, barely 2.5 millimeters in diameter, ended in a metal tube that was inserted into the keyhole in the center of the doorknob, whilst the other, ending in a plastic mouthpiece, was placed between his lips.

He reached into his secret sleeve-pocket for a second pink-tipped match, and struck it against the floor as he knelt. This match had evidently been cut from a section of wood that had contained a thick knot—it was dark brown and rough. No matter. It would burn all the longer.

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As it sparked to life, he held it under the sac that dangled between the two cords, and blew through the tube. The liquefied substance would now be forced through the thin tubing and would fill the keyhole in a matter of moments. In sixty seconds, it would dry and harden, functioning as a key that could later be copied.

He pulled the match away just as it began to burn the moisture off his fingertips, and let it fall. Once the wax had dried, he pulled the tubing free and twisted the dark lump that boiled from the center of the knob. The door smoothly clicked open.

The weaponry is in the kitchen. The hallway that greeted him was barren and white, and the small, well-furnished kitchen was visible at the end of it as a vibrant punctuation of colors and forms. He quickly closed and locked the door behind him.

It was a small apartment; to his right was a low-ceilinged doorway to a dark room that served as both living room and bedroom. This room was lit only by a picture window on the south wall and meager track-lighting which was bolted to the ceiling above the head of the bed.

The room was without decorations, save for such ubiquitous items as a vase filled with dried flowers, which rested on the marble top of an old, damaged bureau, and a rustic nature-study cheaply framed and hung on the west wall. A thin fracture in the white cement ran diagonally down the wall, disappeared behind the picture, and reemerged from under the opposite corner as two diverging cracks. The room smelled as if it had been freshly cleaned with some sort of industrial-strength soap, like the kind he always smelled in school buildings. It had a sharp lemon tang. The bed was freshly made, and tucked in at the corners with a crisp precision.

Slowly, the assassin lowered himself to his hands and knees, and peered at the underside of the bed. Once, in Los Angeles, he had met an old professional who told him about a room search in an Excelsior Hotel where he'd later bagged a decrepit Mafioso. Looking under the rumpled bed, he'd found a note, stuck to the underside of the mattress with a diaper pin, that read: *You are looking in the wrong place!* Here, however, he found only cleanliness; even underneath the bed, the floor had been freshly swept and disinfected.

He hopped to his feet again. There was a small closet in the southwest corner of the room. He walked over to it and stuck his head in. Coat hangers, a few of them with coats on them. They were old, unappealing coats, the kind that someone would rather leave behind than pack.

Uninterested, he closed the closet and left for the kitchen.

The only windows in the kitchen were on the south wall, and they had already been opened. To his left, the east, was a small gas stove with a teapot on the front left-hand burner. Hanging

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above it was as assortment of cast-iron pans—five sizes—and other crockery. South of this was a countertop with a mosaic of small tiles, a wash of earthen brown sparsely populated with light blues. A handsome, thoroughly stocked spice rack sat on the south wall, to the immediate left of the window.

Sitting in the center of the kitchen table was a silver metal shock-proof rifle case. The assassin grinned and walked over to the table. From a side pocket, he slipped out a pair of thin brown gloves and put them on. Now it was simply a matter of applied thumb pressure. . . . The case popped open with a friendly *snick* and revealed a slender, customized 9mm precision target rifle with a removable barrel, polarized sight gauge, and a full magazine. Very similar to the kind he had practiced on, only much more elegant. He collected the pieces from where they floated in a sea of dark gray foam and slid them together.

In a few short moments, the assassin sat next to the open kitchen window with his newly acquired treasure lying across his knees. For the first time in many days, a feeling of bliss and contentment warmed his heart. Despite a few anxious moments, things were going just as they were supposed to. He had found the correct address, acquired the weaponry from the kitchen, and now sat by the window waiting for the sunset—and the subsequent appearance of the mysterious beehive in the window. It was the end of a beautiful spring afternoon. Time to enjoy another cigarette!

Checking his case, he found that he had only two left. One was a Djarum clove—a tasty number, but only really appropriate when one is in the company of others. He decided, then, on the other, which was an Indian cigarette called a *bidi* that looked rather like a joint. It consisted of a thin roll of very high quality, untreated tobacco wrapped in a dried leaf and tied with a small, coarse string. It was the ideal cigarette for someone who is waiting, alone with their thoughts.

He looked out the window and slowly took in the sweep of the view before him. The city was essentially a momentary open space within endless miles of Alpine wilderness. Earlier that day, he had taken a tram up to the snowy peak of one of the mountains. He recalled how all the buildings in Innsbruck had looked like minuscule toys, like dice thrown haphazardly upon a wide, imperial carpet.

To its credit, Innsbruck had, like any good Austrian city or town, a tall, serene clock tower to mark its highest point. At certain hours of the day, it would chime, and at others, the doors beneath the clock face would open and a parade of wooden phantoms would stumble out, chasing each other in circles, ringing bells with large hammers, doing whatever it is that such creatures are meant to do. At least, such would happen, had the door of this

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clock tower not been concealed by a blue tarp, presumably the covering of some major repair or restoration project.

He took the final drag from his *bidi,* and crushed it out on his boot sole. The sun was now setting to his right, lighting the mountaintops with a shimmering yellow-orange halo. It was time to start looking for the beehive in the window.

So far as he could tell, there were several likely candidates. From east to west, there was: 1) a modern, ten-story, low-rent apartment building, which stuck out on the fringe of the city like a gangrenous limb. Like so many European cities, Innsbruck had crossed into modernity by developing an encrustation of chintzy architecture at its edges. Such is progress. 2) a government building, near the clock tower. The town center, where it sat, was constructed along winding, curiously askew street-paths, so that the front windows of this building faced him at a diagonal. This could be problematic, as greater distances can leave a bullet more subject to course-changes. When shooting through a window, it is always best to hit it at a perpendicular. Finally, 3) the top apartment of a building in the wealthy part of town, a centuries-old beauty with creeping plant life cascading down from every porch and window box.

An even cross section of society was thus represented among the candidates. The first would be the most difficult, because he had some eighty-odd windows to choose from. However, it was much easier to kill a poor person without causing too much of a stir, and it was always best to avoid a public spectacle, if possible. Of course, there would be no need to kill such a person from a great distance. They would be easily approachable, and could be met face-to-face—and that required a different kind of assassin.

The second would make more sense. Politicians are best felled from far away. Halfway across town is an ideal distance. However, had the government building been his real target, he would surely have been situated someplace where he could see more of the room. From here, through the magnification of the target sight, he could only see about one-quarter of each room on the top floor—enough to make out desk lamps, telephones, and bookshelves, but not enough to guarantee a clean shot at the brains of the body politic.

No, this was bound to be a knock-off of the wealthy private sector. He was perfectly situated to send a bullet right through that comfy covering of imported flora, right into an unsuspecting skull, burrowing an expressway from the superego to the id.

Aha! A light from within. A hand moved away from a switch on the wall and someone, no, *two* people, walked into the room. Or at least, they started to. One figure—he couldn't yet make out features—went back to the entrance, reached for the light switch,

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and made a twisting motion with its hand. The lights dimmed to less than half their initial brightness.

He lifted up the rifle, released the safety, and perched the tip of the barrel just above the window sill as he crouched behind it. One figure walked toward the window, the other lingered behind in the deep recesses of the room. The first figure reached for something above his head. A second light came on.

The assassin felt a ripple of excitement run down his spine. It was an ovoid Japanese lantern, made from metal rings and thin, white tissue paper. The connection was obvious. It was shaped like a beehive. It glowed at him from across the dimming city, illuminating the face of an impeccably dressed, middle-aged man.

The words were becoming a reality! And now . . . the next step . . . was *her.* She walked into the window frame, dressed just as he had last seen her. Fur coat. Red hat.

The woman and the gentleman traded a few words with each other, each standing on opposite sides of the cross hairs.

Shoot the red hat at absolute first sight.

Perfection. He would follow the instructions to the letter.

At absolute first sight.

He could still feel the gentle warmth of her thigh against his lips. To the letter.

First sight.

The man began to remove his jacket, and stepped out of view. The woman remained at the window, looking out onto the city below. The cross hairs met at the center of her forehead. He watched her, his trigger finger tensing.

She saw something, somewhere on the streets below where he could not see, and smiled. From elsewhere in the apartment, the man was probably chattering, making suave small talk as he selected from the cabinet a good-but-not-his-special-best after-dinner liqueur. Dusting the neck of the dark glass bottle, he would talk about the past, his youth, his favorite Goethe. But she was not listening. The woman looked downward, at something delightful that was happening outdoors, among the evening crowds and away from the cultivated sorrow of her present client. Something the assassin could not see.

At absolute first sight.

He fired. The recoil of combustion gave his right shoulder a mighty kick. There was a brief whistling sound, like the shriek of a zipper being violently ripped open, as the bullet split the air.

She fell away from the window, her face obscured by the frosty circle that had suddenly appeared in it.

He pulled in the rifle and hunkered down on the floor, under the window sill. The windows would remain open, of course. It was

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evening, and most people in town were cooking. Surely there were lots of open kitchen windows.

You must remain unseen. Remainder of payment forthcoming upon successful completion.

Faith.

With a clarity and a nearness that terrified him, bells from the church tower suddenly rang out. Once, twice, again, again. From underneath the clanging rose some sort of din. The sound, it seemed, of many voices shouting in exuberant celebration.

A sickness began to spread in his stomach. What was happening?

Slowly he poked his head up from beneath the window sill again. The bells in the clock tower continued to ring, but something was changing. The blue tarp was being lowered by rope, invisible hands pulling it from beneath. With a final rip, it came fluttering off to reveal the doors, newly repainted, beneath the clock face. Halogen lamps sparked to life, rendering the artwork luminous.

Painted across the doors, and bisected by the thin crack between them, was a stylized representation of an oak tree, behind which an orange, medieval sun was setting. From one low branch, on the right door, hung a beehive surrounded by a swarm of black paint-dots.

At the end of the sixth chime, the doors swung open. A lilting waltz began to emanate from within, a wooden platform slid forward like a rigid tongue, and the wooden creatures began to emerge. Gnomes, goblins, hunched blacksmiths, and winged fairies wheeled out, one by one, to do their intricate mechanical dances, then fell back into the darkness again. An unseen crowd—which had gathered, it seemed, beneath the clock tower—began to clap and cheer, as if this very moment heralded the end of a long and tragic winter.

The assassin watched, his mouth agape, as the most elaborate timepiece he had ever encountered unwound its intestinal bestiary before an increasingly ecstatic crowd. New fixtures continued to emerge—a twirling ballerina, an apple tree that grew and blossomed, a cloud of hummingbirds that must have been manipulated by minute stilts. And more. All these creatures had finally been released, and the whole town had gathered to witness it.

The assassin swallowed painfully. His mouth was dry, and a cold fist slowly closed around his heart. *What had he done?*

When the procession finally ended, the waltz melody concluded by taking a final chromatic leap upwards, flying into high notes he had known no church or clock tower to possess before. The dancers and wheelers disappeared, but the doors remained opened, and the platform extended. The clapping and cheering again grew louder, expectantly.

Another shape began to stir in the darkness of the tower. The

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assassin, needing use of his truest vision, put the sight of the rifle to his eye once more. Stepping into the cross hairs, and receiving the fanatic adulation of the invisible crowd, was a man. He wore a gray suit with a small brown bow-tie, and a black handkerchief loosely tucked into his breast pocket. His arms were raised in a triumphant V. In his right hand he held a hammer, and in his left, a small chisel.

His hat, an artisan's cap, was comically red. It would have been easily visible from twice the distance. It hovered over his thick eyebrows, his glass-button eyes and swollen nose, like a beacon. *Shoot here! Shoot here!* it screamed at him.

But the assassin could not shoot. The possibility of triangulation ruled this out. Given two dead bodies in different parts of the city, shot by the same bullets within minutes of one another, it would not take long to find the very apartment from which he fired, and thus, possibly, the people who had hired him.

He had to leave. *The weaponry is in the kitchen. It does not leave the kitchen.* Quickly, he disassembled the deadly apparatus, removed the magazine, and stuffed the freshly warmed pieces back into their dark, antiseptic case.

He stood up, and left the kitchen. The bells seemed to follow him, growing to greater and greater heights of intensity. He yanked open the front door and bounded down the stairs.

As he ran down the first flight, he began to wonder what was happening now in that dark, plant-choked apartment. Was the gentleman gasping in horror? Or merely put off? Did he fear for his own life, or just bemoan the pool of blood on his carpet?

Shluck! His left foot slipped as he hit the landing, and the assassin fell face-forward onto the cold, smelly slate. He winced, not at the pain on the left side of his face, but with disgust at what had tripped him—that foul, unknown substance.

He scrambled to his feet again and bounded down the stairway. The din from the crowd outside was growing louder. Disgusted, he hurled himself down the last two flights of steps, into the dark alcove that ended in the front door. He moved through the darkness with his right hand held out before him. He found the door, and pulled at the metal crossbar.

The door did not budge. He cursed to himself and tried the handle. Nothing. The door was solid as cement. He pulled at the crossbar again and, finding it unyielding, kicked the door. He shook the handle, trying to rattle something loose, but to no effect. He pulled at the crossbar again, and it came loose in his hands.

"Goddammit!" he shouted. "*Sheisse!*" He flung the crossbar to the floor.

Desperate, he felt around the edge of the door with his fingertips.

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The sticky substance he had noticed before now seemed to have proliferated. It was everywhere. The door had been sealed shut.

"Hah!" He blew an exasperated syllable into the darkness.

Faith. The final instruction came to him then, just as his panic teetered between the urge to ram the door with his shoulder, or head back up the stairway from which he came. *Faith.* As the crowd continued to roar outside, he remembered something that the old professional in L.A. had told him once. "The best time to shoot someone is on the night of the Fourth of July," he had said. Yes, he thought to himself. That makes sense. It's self-evident. It's all a matter of timing. *Perhaps she* was *the target after all!* Yes, that would make sense. To have *faith* in his employer, he would have to trust his logic. He had followed the instructions to the letter! There had only been a moment of panic. It was his first assignment. He had been a nervous virgin, and that was all.

No matter.

He took two deep breaths, turned around, and walked back up the stairway towards the fading light of the second landing. Perhaps his employer would find him there. His heels clicked with each step, giving him the impression that he was being followed.

Up, up, and there was her door. It was open, just a crack. He remembered seeing her lock it. With a gentle nudge of his foot, he pushed the door open.

The apartment had a floor plan identical to the one from which he had fired, but there the similarity ended. All around him were drapes, tapestries, patterned carpets, and curtains, hung across each surface. The bed was a rumpled floor mattress. The covers had been torn aside, leaving stained sheets to the open air.

The bedroom was stuffed with furniture—old wooden chairs, coffee tables, tea trays, a massive Victorian couch, a table lamp shaped like a glass weeping willow.

The ceiling light had been left on. The room was warm. He turned and shut the door behind him. The din from outside seemed finally to have died down.

He shuffled into the room. A sudden calm, or a great fatigue, left him feeling dizzy and weak. Was it fatigue? Or was it, perhaps, the overpowering thickness of odor in this room? His nostrils were filled with remnants of incense, the scent of red wine, and cigarette ash.

He closed his eyes and inhaled. Ginseng cigarettes, as well as some form of light menthols, and . . . yes, Galoises. The incense was opium-scented. Hmmm, what else? Mothballs. Cabernet sauvignon . . . and a spilt bottle of perfume, from maybe two weeks ago, that had never been fully cleaned up.

He opened his eyes again. There was a large red chair to his left, a few feet from the foot of the bed. Despite large wounds that

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dripped yellowed stuffing in long strands, it appeared to be immensely comfortable. A small end table stood under the right arm of the chair. Sitting on top of it was a lone glass ashtray, occupied by a few prematurely stubbed cigarettes, all menthols. This last detail puzzled him. The smoker had been the kind of person who holds the filter too far inside the mouth, so that the end becomes wet and wrinkled. It had not been the woman. He had made careful note of her technique.

He reached inside his jacket for his own cigarette case, and pulled out the remaining clove. He lit it with the butane lighter that sat next to the ashtray. The sharp crackle of clove-smoke nipped playfully at his tongue and tonsils.

There is something else in here, he thought. He closed his eyes again. Beneath the candied odors and spilled fragrances, he could smell something that was uniquely *her.* Something warm, and kind of sweet. He had noticed it when he kissed her. He shuddered for a moment, and felt a pang of regret. He remembered that he'd been able to feel her heartbeat only a few hours ago.

"A fine bouquet, is it not?" The voice, a smooth British baritone, came from directly behind him. The assassin let out an inadvertent yelp and spun around.

He had never left the building. That was the only explanation. After leaving the woman's apartment, fresh from the tryst, he had waited in the shadows at the foot of the stairs until she left and then he'd sealed the door. "Try not to be alarmed," said the Englishman. "I'm not here to report you to the authorities." The large man stood like a monolith in front of the doorway, holding the metal gun case. He waved his free hand under his nose, as if sampling the aroma from a stew pot. "The sense of smell has a tremendous capacity to evoke memories. You don't have to stand in this place for long to know that there's a lot of history here."

The assassin could not speak. His blood ran cold. What was this man's game? Was he an undercover agent? Perhaps the man was toying with him before disposing of him. He hungrily eyed the metal case, which the Englishman placed on the floor next to his feet.

The Englishman extended an empty hand in the direction of the assassin. "May I see the instructions, please?"

Instructions! This man knew the details of the assignment. The assassin reached into his jacket, clumsily missing an inner pocket that he normally reached without difficulty.

"No need to panic, old chap. I'm the one who wrote them." The Englishman chuckled. It was a respectful show of amusement, as from a teacher to an able student.

"I . . . I'm . . ." the assassin stammered, fumbling through his jacket. "I made every effort to follow your instructions to the letter,

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sir." He finally drew out the finger-worn document and handed it forward.

"Of course you did, lad. Of course you did." The Englishman read over the document he had authored. The assassin, in his nervous state, found himself engaging in the passive scrutiny that always overcame him when presented with authority. He could see the fine wisps of hair that floated like dissipating clouds over the reflective, planet-like surface of the scalp. Such details, on the bodies of the powerful, leapt at him. The fraying ends of the dark-blue shirtsleeves, the yellow fingernails . . . his employer had an almost seductive grubbiness about him. "Yes. Yes," he spoke at the paper, then looked up, smiling again. "Yes. I was never less than confident that you would be unerringly thorough." He folded up the paper. From his back pocket, he removed a small, thick, leather-bound notepad, filled with similarly folded parchments. He paged through to a particular section, and placed the list inside. He returned the notepad to his pocket, without comment. "I apologize for barricading you in, but I was afraid that you might flee the scene before I could make you an offer."

The Englishman moved into the living room, carrying the gun case with him, and sat down on the red chair. He pulled a mentholated cigarette from his front pocket and lit it with the same butane lighter that the assassin had used moments before. He eyeballed the clove cigarette that the assassin held in his own hand—bent and frayed, so the assassin now noticed, from his own nervous thumbing of it. "Hmm. Never would've taken you for a clove man," said the Englishman. His mouth and nose seemed cavernous as thick, minty smoke poured from them. He clicked the lighter shut and regarded it for a moment. "I bought this for her in Munich, not long ago." He placed it, standing up, on the table next to the ashtray. His heavy eyes twinkled with the memory of something past.

A siren roared by outside, quickly followed by another—police cars, and an ambulance. The Englishman leaned back, smoking and listening, as if enraptured by a symphony. "They're already on the move, those white coats and blue coats, plunging into the swarming crowd with stretchers and barricades. It's all so predictable, isn't it? When you set things in motion, if your plans are precise, you can sit back and just watch everything . . ." He closed his eyes for a moment, seeming to enjoy a vision he had conjured "*. . . unwind.*"

"You mentioned something about an offer," said the assassin, "for a job well done?"

The Englishman regarded him steadily. "Yes. I can see we have a lot in common, you and I. And not just because you, like myself, are drawn to this room." There was a momentary tension in his voice,

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as if he struggled to hide something. "But also because we are curious. We like to be drawn into things. We like to examine, discover."

The assassin nodded. A nervous percolation of laughter escaped his lips.

"Yes, indeed." The Englishman grinned, his skin bright and oily. The assassin could see years of bought intimacy written on that weary face. What had happened between them? What had she known? He remembered how her eyes had held him. Even now, in the muffled silence of this sultry room, the assassin could see himself within the cathedral of her face, wading in the depths of a vast, oceanic cornea.

"I would like," began the Englishman, "to offer you the opportunity to be something more than just another mindless cog in a machine. You see, I represent—"

The phone rang. The Englishman rolled his eyes with frustration. "You will excuse me," he said, stubbing out his cigarette. "Those close to me have always known where to find me." He sighed. "I'll be back with you in just a moment, lad. You're going to want to know something about the man you just shot. . . ." He grinned and quickly strode into the hallway, gun case in hand.

The assassin froze, his heart suddenly pounding. *He did not know.* His faith in the assassin had been unshaken because he had assumed. He had waited downstairs, never doubting, never knowing who the actual victim had been.

"Hello? Roger? Yes. Yes. . . ."

The assassin turned, sprang out of the bedroom, and ran out the front door of the apartment. The window on the landing showed no sign of having been opened recently, but he forced it open nonetheless. It only took a couple of seconds, and, in his rush, he did not notice the cuts on his fingers. He could feel the scene uncoil behind him—the Englishman standing silently at the phone, first dumbfounded, then angry. *Vengeful.* He leapt out the window, and was caught by a dumpster that sat at the end of the narrow alleyway. By then, enough time had passed for him to become a target of revenge. He climbed out and scrambled to his feet and ran.

He ran through alleyways, down sidewalks, recklessly dodging traffic and trouncing through puddles. He headed in a direction he instinctively believed to be an edge, a place where the city ended. Along his spine a warm spot lingered, awaiting the entry of a well-placed bullet.

Hours later, he found that he had emerged into a large crowd of people, gathered together in an open space, whose faces he could not discern because his eyes were bleeding salt. ●

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The Winning Ticket

by David Terrenoire

Okay, I admit, accidents happen. But the bowling ball, that had Joan written all over it. I just never thought she'd kill me for a lousy sixty-three thousand dollars.

If I had it to do all over again, I'd roll right past the Pay and Go, park the car, settle in with the Dolphin's game, and forget about the damn lottery.

But I felt lucky.

The big one, the seventy-eight million, now that would be different. Seventy-eight million is life-changing money. Hell, that's world-changing money. Seventy-eight million is enough for me, Joan, and the IRS. But sixty-three thousand? That's not even enough to buy a decent boat. You waltz into a showroom with that and be prepared to pony up another twenty grand for cup holders.

I'm not crazy, no matter what the court says. When you've been married as long as I have, you get to know the person you're sleeping with. Not that I got much sleep, not after I bought that damn ticket.

The first thing she says when we hear the numbers, is now we can travel. She thinks we're going to blow everything on plane tickets and cruise ships, like there's any place out there worth seeing, even from the window of a five-star hotel. Bunch of poor people trying to steal my damn camera, that's what we'd see.

Then, about the third morning into our good luck, Joan surprises me with breakfast. She never fixes me breakfast. But there it was. Bacon and eggs, waffles with butter, and fresh-perked coffee. I said, "What? Are you trying to kill me?" as a joke, but the

David Terrenoire got his start as a writer in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories in March of 1999. Since then he has sold stories to *Blue Murder Magazine* and *Hardboiled*. He is currently working on a novel and says, "I still live in North Carolina and I'm still working on a happy ending here." His darkly humorous new short story takes us to a retirement community in Florida.

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idea sticks, like a finger in my eye.

I get to thinking. Maybe she hopes a chunk of buttered waffle will lodge in my aorta, leaving her free to spend all that money walking around countries that hate America. But Joan is way too impatient to wait for a myocardial blowout. So she starts looking for ways to improve her odds.

For instance, she suggests I walk her dog. Can you believe the evil of this woman? To show you how trusting I am, I don't see it. Not right away, I think I'm just walking the mutt down to the park so he can water the bushes. But as we round the corner, I can see a method here, oh yes, I can see Joan's mind at work.

Joan and I live in a retirement community built around a golf course. Most of us, except for a few droolers too stroked out for ceramics class, have a pretty active lifestyle. That's what the Social Events Coordinator calls it. I didn't even know I had a lifestyle until I moved down here. But we have dances and aerobics and everyone moves around pretty good for old people.

So I'm not thinking anything about this walk, just enjoying the sun on my lifestyle, when the dog and I get close to the water hazard up on the eighth fairway. It's big, this hazard, and dark and full of balls because no one will reach in there, not even for a Titleist. An alligator lives in that water hazard, an alligator everyone calls Big Al.

Big Al likes to hiss and show his teeth to guys who get too close. He's eight feet long's my guess and weighs more than Joan's uncle, but with a disposition like Joan's aunt. Al likes to sun himself on the fairway and snatch up wayward balls like marshmallows. But there's one thing he likes even more than gobbling golf balls and that's gobbling dogs. To Al, Muffy here's a Twinkie on a leash, an appetizer to that main course, the big slow guy at the other end.

When it hits me, the full import, I'm shocked at Joan's cold-hearted greed. To think she would sacrifice Muffy on the slim chance that I'd rescue her dog from an eight-foot gator. Chilled, I pick the dog up, turn around, and make a fast break for home. That's when I smell it. First I think I'm maybe brain-damaged. Then, I sniff Muffy's fur and there it is. Muffy smells like bacon, like ten pounds of obedience-trained Baco-bits. This, my friends, is how low Joan will sink for a full-buffet cruise surrounded by men who can't speak English.

I get home, prepared to sit Joan down and discuss this, before things get out of hand. I call out and she says she's upstairs. Her voice sounds surprised, and a little nervous. Uh-huh. I put my hand on the banister and start up.

That's when I hear it roll across the hardwood to the top of the steps. One second I'm climbing up like I've done a million times, the next I'm watching my Brunswick Zone Pro hurtle towards me,

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sixteen pounds of pin-busting fury, and I know what those boys at Bull Run must have felt like. I duck left and it goes left, splintering banister posts like chicken bones. I go right and it goes right, cratering plaster. Then I feint right, dodge left, and the ball bruises my calf before crashing out through the screen door, nearly taking out Muffy.

But back to the stairs. After the Zone Pro bounds by, I look up and see Joan, her eyes wide, her hands on her cheeks. She asks if I'm all right and when I catch my breath and say yes, I see something else there, something else in Joan's eyes. I see disappointment.

I heard some radio Freud say there are no accidents, even accidental ones. So I start watching my back. It's how I made it from Guadalcanal to Okinawa with nothing more than a life-long aversion to canned fruit.

First, I figure, I need to get out of the house to plan my defenses. Joan looks at me. I can see stuff going on behind those blue eyes and she says, "You're so jumpy, why not go play a few holes. It'll take your mind off."

I say, "Sure, but I think I'll skip the fairway on eight," and waggle my eyebrows to show her I know what's up and she looks at me like I'm crazy.

Oh yeah, that's right. She's trying to feed me and the pooch to the gators and I'm the one's gone round the bend.

I unplug the golf cart and wheel her out to the street. At the clubhouse I join up with Bill Bonaventure, Jimmy Clanahan, and Tom Lightner, a blowhard from Cincinnati, moved down here last winter, thinks he knows everything. But Tom slices like a bastard and I'm afflicted with this hook so we play on opposite sides of the fairway a lot. That way I don't have to listen to his jabber much and that makes it okay.

We're on the sixteenth, the only hump that could pass as a hill in this part of Florida, when a thunderstorm roars up from somewhere in the Gulf. Bill and Jimmy are in the middle of the fairway, looking up at the clouds. Tom and I are by the pin and we know we should get out of the rain, but where? Tom suggests the trees, like that's such a good idea, Mr. Information from Cincinnati, and I say let's get in the cart, and scoot back to the clubhouse for beer.

Just then the air seems to be sucked away and the hair on my arms stands up. I push Tom to the green just as this bolt, I swear to God, as big around as Joan's sister, blasts into that grove of trees and it's like I'm back on the beaches at Iwo just trying to become one with Mother Earth.

The rain soaks us, Tom and me, as we lie out there flat on the grass, and the first question that comes to my mind is: How did Joan know?

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Back at the clubhouse, I'm like this hero. Tom tells everyone I saved his life. Bill Bonaventure says standing next to me's gotta be the luckiest place on earth, and Jimmy even pays for a round, an act so rare that it stops the conversation. I accept the beers and after a few I head home.

I'm a bit wobbly, but I make it okay and pull the cart in to charge her up. There's a big puddle of water blown onto the concrete pad by the storm and I guess my guard is down because of the beers and all because I'm standing in an inch of water when I reach for the plug. My hand is just inches away from enough electricity to jump-start Ole Sparky. I stop. I look at the cord. I look at the water. I look at the cord again and see it's a little ragged. How long's the cord been frayed like that? I wonder. I touch the water and sniff my fingers. Is that chlorine I smell? If it is, then this isn't rain water. This is water from the house. This is house water. And right then I know that Joan is trying to light me up like a friggin' Christmas tree.

I sneak around back and see her through the kitchen window, her back to me. I think for a minute that this whole thing's got me peeping my own wife like some pervert with zero imagination. Then I can see her elbow moving, zip zip zip, like she's plucking a bird. She turns. She holds up a carving knife as long as my forearm. Its blade catches the light as she tests the edge with the meat of her thumb. Then she smiles and it hits me like an ice-water enema.

I need some space. So I walk down to the lake and park myself on one of the picnic tables nobody uses because of the mosquitoes, and I try to think. Am I losing it here, slipping into that shadow land where people have to watch me all the time so I don't wander off and hurt myself? I've seen it happen. Jack Watkins started to unravel last year. They found him down by the pool. He'd built a little nest out of sticks and twigs. So how do you know when the gray cells go south? I mean, one day you're singing along to the radio, know all your relatives by name, and the next day you're seeing monkeys in the woodwork.

After a while, I wander back to the house, convinced I'm maybe imagining this. I mean, even Joan can't control lightning. The fact that she watches the weather channel the way I watch pro sports doesn't mean anything. So maybe my brain is just mixed up because of the ticket and all. Joan and I have been married since V-J Day, and I know her. At least I think I know her.

When I get to the house, I come in the back door and Muffy sniffs at my pant leg.

"Honey?" Joan says from the kitchen, "is that you, dear?"

She meets me in the hallway and kisses my cheek, and I wonder

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how I could have ever suspected this little girl of mine. God, that money's got me jumpy.

"Where have you been?"

"Down by the lake, thinking about stuff," I say.

"Thinking about that boat," Joan says and she smiles.

"Maybe," I answer. "Or maybe I'm thinking about a new video camera for all the trips I'll be taking with my little bride. What do you think about that?"

She kisses me again. "You look tired."

"I am," I said, and rub the back of my neck. For the first time all day I feel my muscles all bunched up back there.

Joan feels them, too, and says, "You're tight as a fist. Why not go upstairs and relax in the whirlpool. I'll bring you something nice."

I go upstairs, strip naked, and run the water. When we bought the house I thought this Jacuzzi was a big waste of money, but Joan liked it. Since then, I've got to admit that it's just the thing with a beer after eighteen holes. I get the water nice and hot, whooshing around in there, and then I lower myself into the soup.

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I know, Muffy's barking and I hear Joan at the bathroom door. "Honey?" she says, "I have a surprise for you."

The knob turns.

"Honey?"

The door swings open.

"Honey?" Joan is standing in the doorway. There's something heavy in her hands.

I take one look and I know . . .

"I thought maybe you'd like to watch some TV."

. . . Joan is trying to fry me like a fritter.

Joan steps in and I jump up, naked and dripping but scrambling, trying to get away from the tub full of juice-conductive H_2O. But my feet slip on the slick bottom and I fall back into the water with a heavy splash and there I stay, helpless as an upended turtle.

Joan steps to the edge of the tub, the TV in her hands, and all I can do is scream. My own voice, ragged and strange in my ears. I'm not ashamed to admit it, I screamed like a little girl.

Joan screams too, and drops the portable. The TV smashes on the floor and she runs from the room. Now she knows I know, and suddenly, the game slips into a higher gear.

I climb from the tub and quickly blot myself dry. In the bedroom I pull out clean socks and boxers, a pair of checked pants and a polo shirt with a long tail. I reach into the back of my top drawer and there, wrapped up in a T-shirt, is my service pistol, my .45. I don't know why I kept it. A reminder, I guess, for all those years I lived with it on my hip.

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I take out the magazine and lock open the slide. There are bullets in the magazine, and I wonder how long they keep. I decide I should get new ones, just to be safe.

I get dressed, then tuck the pistol into my golf pants and pull the shirt tail out to cover the grips. I hear a car and I look to see who's here. Squatting in my driveway is a big blue Chevy Caprice, the kind that looks like it's overinflated by about sixty pounds. It's Bill Bonaventure's blue Caprice. Blue, he says, to match his eyes.

Joan always said that Bill's a nice-looking man, but I don't see it. His hair is blond and wavy, sure, and he's got plenty of it, which makes him a Valentino in our circle, but I think his face looks like a boiled ham. Must be the way he dresses that attracts the ladies, all those cream-colored slacks and open silk shirts.

Bill once told me he paid four hundred dollars for a particular pair of pants. I said the only way I'd have pants worth four hundred dollars is if I'd left three hundred and eighty dollars in the pocket.

I sneak downstairs and peek around the corner, into the kitchen. There's Bill and Joan at the kitchen table and they're whispering so I can't hear what they're saying.

After a moment, Bill and Joan stand up and I watch Bill open his arms. Then, shocked, I watch Joan go to him, and she lets that big ham-faced fraud in the four-hundred-buck trousers give her a hug.

So Bill's in on it, too. I reach under my shirt and grip the big pistol. If I'd been sure about those old bullets, I would have sent them both home to Jesus, right there, but I decide to hold up and not tip my hand, just in case these rounds are dead as Joan's conscience.

I wait until that self-inflated bastard in the fat Caprice pulls away, and then I walk into the kitchen like I just got there. Joan looks all concerned and says, "Are you all right, dear?" like she's not planning to feed my carcass to Big Al out on eight, but her eyes are hooded, all snaky, like she suspects that I suspect and maybe I'm catching on to her little game. "Are you sure you're okay?"

I tell her sure I'm sure, why wouldn't I be sure, and I watch for her reaction. When she brings up the TV I just shrug like it happens all the time. No big deal.

"Bill was here. He told me what happened out on the golf course. No wonder you're all shaken up." She steps toward me and I instinctively take a step back and nearly fall over the damn dog. She can't train the mutt to pee in the yard, but she can get him to trip me up on command. When Joan sets her mind to something, she gets it done, I'll hand her that.

"Bill said you saved Tom's life."

I wave it away, trying to look nonchalant. "Bill exaggerates."

Joan smiles and puts her open palm over my heart. "You're my

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hero," she says, and steps in closer. "Why don't you take me upstairs, Marine, and show me a little CPR?"

But now I'm on my guard. I mean, I've always joked that when I go, I'd want to go in the ole sackola, if you get my drift, but now that it's a real possibility, I have second thoughts. She's not going to catch me with my pants down. No sir. I ease toward the door and Joan gets this worried look on her face again. Yeah, right, worried that I'm getting away. I run for the garage and punch the electric button. The door rattles up, the chain clanks on its track, and the damn door gets halfway up and sticks. "My God," I think, "she's trying to chop my head off."

I'm getting a little panicky now. The woman will stop at nothing to get her hands on that sixty-three grand. I push the door up the rest of the way, get into the Lincoln, and take off for town, hardly slowing at the stop sign, spraying gravel all over the Margulies' yard.

The town, if you can call it that, is just a big strip mall, a bank, and a dozen orange stands out by the Interstate. At one end of the shopping strip is a lock-and-gun store. I buy myself some oil and a box of bullets, nearly twenty bucks' worth, and drive out past the Golden Days Trailer Park. I turn onto a narrow road of packed sand. The Lincoln rolls through a jungle of old oak draped in Spanish moss like faded crepe. At the black water's edge, I toss the old bullets in the drink, then I load up the magazine with shiny, copper-jacketed ammo, fresh as this morning's juice.

I break the pistol down, clean it with my handkerchief, and oil the parts. When I'm ready, I aim the pistol into the air and pull the trigger. The roar jerks me back fifty years and birds rocket from the treetops.

Confident it'll work, I tuck the pistol back into my pants and head home.

I park the Lincoln a block away from the house and sneak through Elliot Campbell's yard. But he sees me from his kitchen window, so I have to stop and talk. Elliot's a former insurance salesman, so you'd think he'd have used up his quota of gum-breeze, but no, there he goes, on and on about the weather and his grandkids and his bursitis. The whole time I'm standing there and the gun stuck in my waistband is beginning to work itself loose and I can feel it slide deeper into my shorts.

Elliot says how lucky I am to have won that money and I say, yeah, I'm lucky all right, and I try to edge away, stiff-legged like one of those incontinent geezers that park themselves on the nineteenth hole. The gun's slipped all the way down into my shorts by now and I'm afraid it'll drop out of my pant leg, right there at Elliot's feet, and wouldn't that be a hell of a thing to explain.

I finally break free. On the far side of Elliot's hedge I stick my hand down the front of my pants and go fishing away. I'm afraid

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one of the widows will see me and get the wrong idea about my interest in things south of the border and suddenly I'm up to my keister in casseroles. But I get the gun rearranged without attracting a crowd, and I'm on my way home.

The sun's gone below the palms by now and lights have come on in most of the houses on our street. But not ours. The windows are as dark as Joan's heart.

I pull the pistol from my pants and thumb the safety off. With my left hand, I turn the doorknob. The kitchen's dark, and the big living room beyond is dark, and I get that hinky feeling standing in the doorway, silhouetted against the fading light, a perfect target for anyone in there with a gun.

I hear Muffy bark out back, out in the yard, and then someone say, "Shhh."

So it's an ambush. Boy, are they in for a shock. I slide open the door to the patio and suddenly, there's a flash. I'm half blinded and the patio lights come on and I can't see, but I point the pistol in the direction of the flash and I squeeze down on the trigger and the roar nearly drowns out the dozen voices hollering, "Surprise!"

I emptied the whole magazine as people screamed and ducked behind the lawn ornaments. The last thing I remember before Bill Bonaventure tackled me was an explosion of boat brochures Joan threw into the air as I filled the backyard with bullets and smoke and noise loud enough to wake the dead.

That was almost two months ago. At first they've got me so doped up all they do is wheel me into the sun like an under-ripe avocado. But I started hiding the pills under my tongue, and after a few days the fog begins to lift.

There's a pretty girl who comes by every day because she and her boyfriend found a bale of pot washed up on the beach and decided to burn it, one joint at a time. The judge didn't see how this was a real benefit to society, so he sentenced her to a lifetime of community service, which is why she reads me my mail every afternoon.

Each week I get another letter, always from someplace new. But the letter always says the same thing. Joan's having a wonderful time and she hopes I'm feeling better. There's always a picture, usually of Joan standing in front of some old building or a fountain or a beach someplace, like we don't have beaches in Florida.

Then one day last week the girl shows me a picture of Joan standing in front of some white columns all fallen over, like that's something you'd want to risk the quick-trots to see. Joan is smiling and waving and the sun is bright and she looks really happy to be there.

For some reason, I didn't toss this picture in the round file like I did all the others. Something whispers in my ear that maybe I should look a little closer. Then it hits me. It's not the photo I

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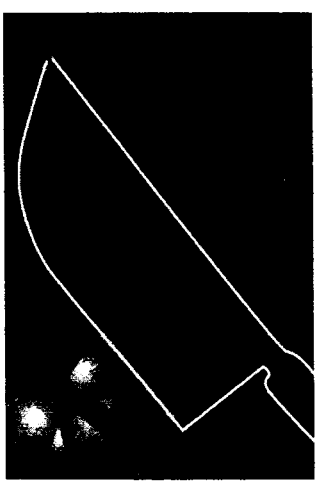
should focus on. It's who's taking the photo, and suddenly I have all the inspiration I need to pull myself together and check out of this bug hotel.

The shrinks say they've never seen such progress, and since I didn't hurt anyone (I never could shoot straight), the prosecutor is considering dropping the charges. That's very considerate of him. Next election, he's got my vote.

Out on the hospital lawn, I take the picture out of my pajama pocket for another look. I'm amazed that I almost missed it. I almost didn't see the cameraman's shadow falling diagonally across the grass. But when I do, right away I see that it's big and beefy, and like that flash of lightning on the sixteenth green, I know that if I could see the man behind my Nikon, I'd see wavy hair and a silk shirt and a four-hundred-dollar pair of pants.

So, yes, I'm getting better and better every day. I'm feeling so much better that the doctors say I could go home to visit in a few weeks. I'm looking forward to that. I know Joan will be home by then. Sixty-three thousand dollars just doesn't go as far as it used to. ●



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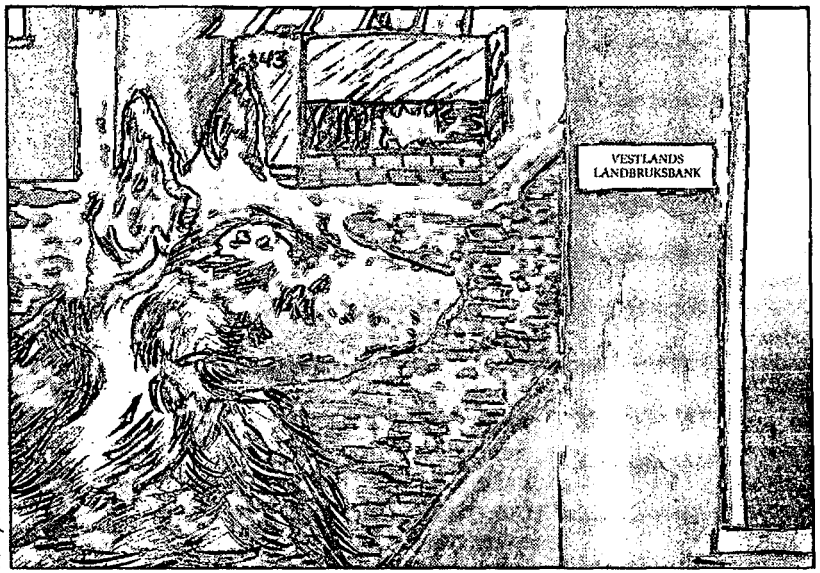

Art by June Levine

Old Dog, New Tricks

by Robert Barnard

I was beginning to get worried about my man. That's one thing that gets most of us hopping mad about a man: you just get him trained up, everything to your liking, and suddenly he goes through a midlife crisis, has a career move, or sinks into a rut of depression. And you have to start all over again.

In the case of my man it was a career move, though the other two played their part, too. He was fifty-five, and, as is normal in Norway, the police retired him. He decided to take me with him, and that was all right by me, though I'd always enjoyed the excitements and the perks of police work. At nine I was, let's say, mature myself, and Svein (my man) told everyone I was beginning to make mistakes. That was a reference to an incident at Bergen Airport, where I missed a packet of marijuana because the young American college boy had a bag with the remains of his roast beef airline dinner in his other pocket. Okay, it was an error—a bad one. But did he have to go on about it? I was consumed with worries about his approaching retirement at the time.

Anyway, Svein set up as a security consultant. Instead of just

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going home with him at night, he and I were in that flat together all day. Just like a married couple when the man retires—finding they get on each other's nerves twice as much when they are twice as much together. Of course, I soon got him trained as to when I wanted my meals, when and how long my walks were to be. Training a man is something some dogs make a great fuss about, but I've never found it difficult. The problem was the boredom.

I had been used to a life full of incident. Every day there was something different—training, public displays, airport and dockyard duties, even the occasional chase. But the truth is, there's hardly any crime in Norway, and what there is can be easily dealt with by the police (who spend most of their days pen-pushing or testing drivers who may be a millimetre over the alcohol limit). Dragsville. Svein put a brass plate on his front door, got an entry in the Yellow Pages, and sat down to wait for the customers to knock, ring, or make contact on the Internet.

And waited. And waited.

That is no life for a dog. As the great philosopher dog Heidegger (fl. Trondheim 1920s) said: "Excitement is the opium of the canine." A life of food and walks and watching bad programmes on television was not for me. And I should have mentioned that there was only Svein and me together in the flat. His wife Unn had walked out on him about eight years previously. She'd moved in with a bank clerk. That's how exciting she found Svein. It would have been less insulting if she'd moved in with a bus conductor. Svein didn't seem to mind, though. He sent her cards for her birthday and Christmas.

"Well, old man," Svein would say to me periodically (nine is *not* old), "business is slow, isn't it?"

No, it was not slow. It was nonexistent.

So that was my situation. Svein and me mooching around the flat most of the hours God sends, me heaving deep sighs periodically and dreaming of my old, thrilling days (exaggerating that side of it a bit) in the police force, sometimes waking up with my paws going like the clappers as if I was in the middle of a thrilling

One never knows what to expect from Robert Barnard in terms of plot or setting or theme; he's one of the genre's most inventive writers. His new story for *EQMM*, with its brilliantly worked point of view, will surely stand out as one of his most memorable short works. Soon after this issue goes to subscribers a new Barnard novel will be available in bookstores: *Unholy Dying* (Scribner). †

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chase. Svein, meanwhile, was doing—well, pretty much the same, actually, though I think what he dreamed about was more, well, personal. His boredom and frustration were all his own fault. Security consultant in Norway! You might as well go on a hunt for bones in a vegetarian colony.

Except that . . . It occurred to me that if business showed no sign of coming to us, we didn't have much option but to go in search of it. And, inevitably, in that search I was going to have to take the lead. As the great social philosopher dog Karl said (fl. Kristiansand ca. 1968): "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." Svein's and my needs were pretty much equal, but there was no question in my mind as to who had the abilities.

I really couldn't see anything of interest turning up in the Minde district of Bergen: too normal, conventional, middle-middle class. Upper-middle might yield some interesting results, but would they be in our line? We were hardly equipped to tackle large-scale tax evasion or company fraud, and in any case, what had either to do with a security consultant? It seemed to me in every way better to start lower down the social scale. Or, perhaps better still, to make no prejudgments about where suitable crime was likely to turn up, and start in the centre of the city. That was where it was all happening, if anything of a criminous nature was happening in Bergen at all. We needed to case the fish market, the park at Nordnæs, all the buildings that made up the university.

In the mornings I began pulling Svein in the direction of the garage. After about four mornings he got the message.

"Bored with your usual walks, are you, boy? Can't say I find them much of a turn-on, either. Let's have a trip to town."

Training tells. Eventually.

At first we stuck to the parks and open areas: Nordnæs park, out on the promontory, and Nygårdsparken, up near the university. We did the first on the first day, the second on the second. I made it clear to Svein, clear as his hazy mind could ever grasp, that I was now a police dog again. This was being on duty, not being bent on pleasure. To that end, I ignored a great many extremely attractive bitches who made "Come up and sniff me some time" gestures in my direction. "Some *other* time, doll," my demeanour told them, as I scurried purposefully off.

The pickings in both parks were meagre: I identified dropping-off places for drugs, two or three in each park. But what could be done with that information by a security consultant? Svein shook his head dubiously, because I think he knew what I was thinking. The police probably had exactly the same information from their own dogs, my mates and my successors, in whom I had perfect confidence (we dogs, unlike human beings, do not denigrate our

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professional colleagues and successors). Anyway, the Bergen police do not pay retired policemen for information. What we needed to start the business rolling was information that was in some way saleable.

After a bit, as Svein got the general idea, we began to do a fairly systematic search and mapping of the central area.

Of course Svein quite often saw people he knew from his thirty-odd years in the Force—local notables, former colleagues, petty criminals. Quite often, I too had them on my computer database—not under "widdles" or "turds," which I would categorise as the pleasure part of my detective work, but under such headings as "work," "crime," "bigwigs," and so on. Every time my memory was stirred, I inserted the appropriate disk and called up the relevant information. Only my computer was all in my head, and needed no cumbersome machinery. The Lord Dog made us dogs well!

One such encounter occurred on the fourth day, as we were walking along Bryggen from Håkonshallen towards the Fish Market. I got the scent fifty metres away, and my mental computer said: pipe tobacco, ripe socks, fish-consumer. As we walked along, Svein spotted him too (he being dependent on sight, having no nose to speak of) and he took the man by the hand.

"Well, well. . . . It *is,* isn't it? . . . *God dag* Kjetil! How are things going with you?"

"Mustn't grumble," said Kjetil Myklebust, in a voice that said that grumbling was precisely what he did much of the time. "Just about surviving on my police handout."

"Don't talk about it," said Svein. "Takes a bit of getting used to, doesn't it, being permanently off-duty?" Myklebust had been stationed at the central branch, so Svein, at Fana, had not had a great deal to do with him in his working life. Still, there was a degree of fellow feeling, as was usual with the newly retired.

"Life can get boring," agreed Myklebust. "Is that mutt one of your old sniffer dogs?"

"Yep! Old faithful Loyd."

Myklebust twisted up his face.

"Wouldn't fancy having one of them around me all the time. A cat's company, but it doesn't give you the same amount of trouble. Those old dogs take all your time feeding them and exercising them, and the rest of the time they just lie around getting mangier and mangier."

I began to pull Svein over the road, to where the office of Molde Kreditkassen bank presented a likely object of criminal interest. My dislike of Mylkebust had been instant. There are worse old coppers than Svein, obviously. I, a dog in his prime, described as lying around getting mangy. And placed below a cat, as being more trouble than we're worth. "The less trouble, the less the value,"

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said Beauty, a family dog (Tromsø, 1977-89) whose homely philosophy has been passed down from generation to generation and has penetrated the thinking of the whole Norwegian canine population.

Over the next few days we continued our search and reconnaissance around the central area of Bergen, striking particular gold in the train and bus stations (always fruitful areas, but with many quite new smells accumulated in the six months since I had retired from the Force), and less predictably around Grieghallen and the Rasmus Meyer Samling—the concert hall and the art gallery (arty types—don't ever get involved with them: feeding unreliable, walks almost nonexistent). Nothing, however, carried with it any suggestion of future profit. I don't say that Svein was reduced to feeding me on the sort of dry meal you mix with water. The police paid better pensions than *that*. But I certainly noticed he was buying the cheaper sort of tin.

It was, in fact, five days after our first meeting with Kjetil Myklebust, when we were doing the areas around the station, that we saw him again. I got his smell first, of course (normally I love ripe socks, but not his), then raised my head and saw him: he was slouching around further along Kong Oscars gate, going into doorways, slipping down side alleys, then reappearing. I made sure, by a judicious timing of tiddles and sniffs, that he was in the street when we approached. Eventually Svein recognised him (how can I get across to him that he needs long-sight glasses?).

"Kjetil! You again! Still at a loose end?"

He looked annoyed.

"Not at a loose end at all. I've always been a city man. Couldn't be anything nicer or more interesting than casing the city streets."

Hmmm. Bergen is the rainiest city in Europe. You'd have to be a bit of a masochist to enjoy casing its streets.

"Well, at least I've got Loyd to give me an excuse," said Svein.

"Who the devil needs an excuse? I do what I feel like doing, and I can do without an excuse that brings fleas and leaves hairs everywhere."

I pulled Svein on, then paused outside the offices of the Ålesund Sparebank, squeezing out of my bladder urine that I didn't know I had. Eventually even Svein had to get the message.

"You know," he said softly, as we continued on our way, "I wouldn't mind betting Kjetil's up to something."

Oh brave new world, that has such human brains in it! I'd decided that when I first got his scent in Kong Oscars gate, and I'd had wisps of suspicion on that first encounter back in Bryggen.

That evening, when we got home, Svein cooked himself one of his boring meals (bought-in kjøtt-kaker that tasted like meat-flavoured cardboard), leaving, as always, something for me (big

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deal), and then settled down in his chair. After a while, he went over to the telephone table and brought back the Yellow Pages. He puzzled over these for some time, then put them aside.

"Must be a new company," he said, seeming mystified. Then he cheered up. "But then, it would be."

If he was puzzled, I was, too. Did he think Kjetil Myklebust was going to advertise his services? I began to worry about brain softening. I had heard that this happened to a lot of policemen soon after they retired from the routine slog work that was the only thing we thought men (in which I include women, of course) capable of.

My doubts were increased when we sighted Myklebust for the third time. We were casing the streets around Mariakirken, and this time both of us spotted him at once, lurking around several intersections away. We started towards him, but a moment or two later he caught sight of us and darted away down a back alley. "The man who decamps at the sight of us is either a dog-hater or is up to no good" (Police Dog Morse, fl. 1990). Or, in this case, both. Svein slackened pace, but I tugged him forward. Away we went, across the little-trafficked streets, until we got to his corner. There it was: a small branch of Vestlands Landsbruksbanken. I didn't feel I needed to urinate to press the point home.

"Looks like I was right," said Svein pensively. "Looks like Kjetil's gone into the security business as well."

I could have wept. The dolt! The dunderhead! The stupid old thickie! I sat there, looking up at him, and then I did the only thing I could think of doing: I threw back my head and howled.

Now, I never howl. It's a thing a lot of dogs do, and they find it useful, but I've usually got my way by more subtle means. But faced with his thickheaded idiocy I just howled and howled, going on and on.

I must have had a lot of unused howl in me.

Eventually a man came to the door of the Vestlands Landbruksbank. I looked at him. Middle-aged, twinkling eye, comfortable girth. I thought he could be useful. I stopped howling at once.

"Oh," he said, grinning at Svein. "I was going to ask you if you'd mind moving him along a bit, but he seems to have stopped of his own accord."

"I just can't understand him," said Svein, scratching his head. "He never howls."

"Well, he seems to have been making up for lost time."

"He's a former police dog. A howler would be no use to us in the Force." An idea seemed to strike him (wonder of wonders!). "By the way, I can't say I admire your security arrangements."

"Security arrangements?"

"The chap you're employing seems to have no idea of how to

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keep a low profile. I presume you're in with other small banks as well, are you? Either he lurks around these banks in a very obvious way, or—like today—he scuttles off, drawing attention to himself. I know him of old, both of us being retired coppers, but I'd have thought he'd have learnt how to do a discreet bit of obbo when he was in the Force."

The man looked at him, frowning.

"We don't employ any private security firm. On the other hand .... Look, could you come inside?"

"Sure," said Svein. "I'll tie up Loyd."

"Oh, bring him in. We're very dog-friendly here." He probably thought I was his only chance of getting an intelligent audience.

It was a very small branch of an insignificant bank. The manager had an office at the back, but a lot of the time, one suspected, he was serving at the counter. He introduced himself as Stig Bjørhovde, settled us (or rather Svein) into a chair, then served us coffee from a gently steaming percolator.

"You see," he said when we were settled, "your words struck a chord. Because there've been several raids on small banks recently—tiny branches of Bergens Privatbank or, like us, banks that don't loom large on the national scene, but need to have a presence in the major cities."

"I see," said Svein, and I hoped he was beginning to.

"So of course we've been alerted by the police, but they can't do much in the way of surveillance, and we've discussed upping our own security by getting a private firm."

"Well, if you do, I hope you'll consider us—" began Svein. And then he stopped, dumbfounded by a thought. "Where have the most recent robberies been?"

"At Molde Kreditkassen round the corner on Bryggen and the Ålesund Sparebank in Kong Oscars gate."

"My God! But that's impossible!"

Impossible? Oh come on, Svein. There's not much crime around in Norway, but if anybody knows about it, and knows about the best way of committing it without getting caught, it's an experienced copper.

"The man mentioned—" prompted the manager gently.

"But he's an old copper, like me," said Svein, his expression totally bewildered and upset. "I thought he was using his golden handshake to set up a security business, like me."

"But you've seen him lounging around the banks I've mentioned."

Miserably, Svein nodded. Perhaps loyalty between colleagues is not so rare in the human species as I've suggested. The silly thing is, Svein had never liked Kjetil: I knew that from his body emanations every time they'd met. If I'd had the same reactions to

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another dog, I'd have first snarled a warning, and if he didn't back off, we'd have had a brief set-to to establish my superiority.

Anyway, the upshot was that the manager, Bjørhovde, rang around the banks that had been robbed, got guesstimates of the raider's height, weight, and age (he always wore a reversed Balaclava helmet with slits for the eyes), and began the business of setting up additional security for all small branches. And that additional security was us.

Being on obbo, waiting for something that *might* happen with no guarantee that it will, is always boring. Svein and I got to the Vestlands Landsbruksbank well before opening and sat in the manager's office all day, Svein reading all the Bergen newspapers until it seemed that no event of whatever insignificance could have escaped his earnest, slow-reading eye. The manager was in and out, serving customers with his assistant on first opening, then again around midday, and at any other time when there were more than two customers. He had alerted us to the really slack times, and at last, on cue, during one of those, I got my first rush of adrenaline for months.

"This is a holdup."

The words sound even more ridiculous in Norwegian than they do in American English. The door to the manager's office had been left slightly open ever since we took up our stations there. I prowled in its direction, waiting for a sign from Svein. We wanted to catch him with the money, of course. Svein kept his eyes on the closed-circuit TV.

"Put your hands above your head. . . . Now put the keys on the desk. . . ."

And so the spiel went on. Talk about passé. And it was only when the cash was in his bag and he was backing out and nearly at the main door, gun still pointing, that Svein, all tense and giving off sweaty signals, at last said:

"Go."

I got to him ten paces into the street outside and three paces from his car. I got him in the leg, and when he howled and staggered I threw myself at his neck with a mental "Pardon my mange" and had him in the gutter by the time that Svein ran up to us. The Bergen police, of course, arrived three-quarters of an hour later, but they did have a couple of my old mates with them, so it all ended very pleasantly. Kjetil Myklebust is currently in a low-security prison making furniture for sale to high-minded persons with little regard for their own comfort.

So now we have work—an income-generator, as Svein rather grandly calls it. I got a great deal of kudos out of the whole matter, and I could very easily have changed my man and upgraded my whole lifestyle if I'd wanted to. On the other hand, if I joined

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Bergen's one big security firm I'd probably spend a lot of my time alone in big, draughty warehouses, or in a pound with a collection of dogs of inferior lineage and limited conversation. No thanks.

After all, I knew Svein. Okay, you can't teach an old man new tricks. And he had all the usual drawbacks that men do have: flatulence, beery smells, hair loss, a periodic tendency to tidy up and take away all the things a dog most cherishes. But when all's said and done, Beauty was right: no trouble, no joy. She wasn't thinking of us dogs, of course, but of men. And she said something else, in her homespun way. They give you an awful lot to put up with, but in the end they're dog's best friend. O

Green Eyes

by Nolen Harsh

It was her eyes that I saw first,
So big and bright and green.
They held a promise yet unknown,
A world of joy unseen.

Our love grew like a wild rose,
Warm sunshine and cool rain.
But life is just a winding road
And sometimes it brings pain.

Another day, another girl,
Another pair of eyes.
My flesh was weak, my ego strong,
My mouth was full of lies.

Green eyes now shed their silent tears.
Hatred replaced the love.
The hand that held the gun that day
Was steady in the glove.

I felt the bullets strike my chest,
My body hit the floor.
She stood by me and shed a tear
And then a dozen more.

It was her eyes that I saw last,
So big and bright and green.
Gone was the promise yet unknown,
The world of joy unseen.

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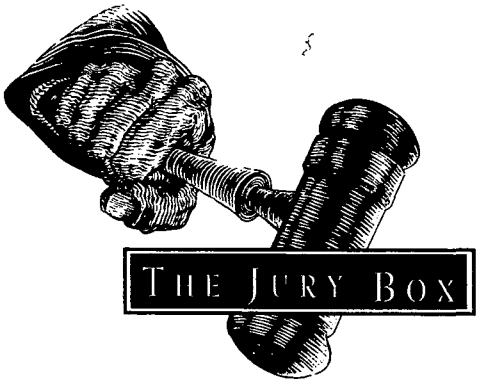

by Jon L. Breen

How many ways can you subdivide the wide field of crime fiction? If you include nationality, point of view, background, subject matter, central characters, types of plots, and various gimmicks, the combinations are almost endless. The first four novels reviewed below offer examples of the following small subcategories (with earlier examples in parentheses): 1) the novel from the mind of the murderer (e.g. Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me)*; 2) the crossword puzzle mystery (Dorothy L. Sayers's short story "The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will," plus novels by Herbert Resnicow and others); 3) Canadian courtroom fiction (John Norman Harris's *The Weird World of Wes Beattie* [1963] and not much else); and 4) the two-author two-series-character collaboration (Craig Rice's John J. Malone and Stuart Palmer's Hildegarde Withers; Richard S. Prather's Shell Scott and Stephen Marlowe's Chester Drum; Bill Pronzini's Nameless and Collin Wilcox's Frank Hastings; Nameless and Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone; Pronzini's John Quincannon and Muller's Elena Olivarez).

**** Nicolas Freeling: *Some Day Tomorrow,* St. Martin's/Minotaur, $22.95. It's hard to imagine two writers as different as Freeling and Thompson, but this calculatedly random and discursive account by a retired botanist suspected of murdering a teenage girl offers a similar fascination. The learned digressions on literary, biological, medical, geographical, social, and culinary topics provide some pointed observations on the Dutch national character. Freeling, a writer of serious literary ambition, is no easy read, but many will find this one-shot even more rewarding than his series novels about van der Valk or Henri Castang.

*** Parnell Hall: *Last Clue & Puzzlement,* Bantam, $23.95. Cora Felton, the famous Puzzle

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Lady, enjoys amateur sleuthing more than crosswords, and those she's credited with constructing are really the work of her niece Sherry Carter. In their second case, a wealthy woman's nutty will sets her potential heirs on a race to solve a puzzle. Hall, one of the purest entertainers on a mystery scene overburdened with social significance, offers a comically complex mystery plot, a deceptively simple crossword, well-drawn characters, and bright narrative and dialogue.

*** Andrew Pyper: *Lost Girls,* Delacorte, $23.95. Toronto attorney Barth Crane, the kind of unscrupulous advocate who gives criminal defense attorneys a bad name, suborns perjury to gain acquittal for a nightclub owner accused of rape, then is sent by his equally unadmirable partners to a small Ontario town to defend a schoolteacher charged with the murder of two teenage girls whose bodies have never been found. Courtroom scenes are fine but, for the trial buff, frustratingly scattered and brief. In a genre-mixing first novel that is more psychological suspense than detective story or legal thriller, there may also be a ghost at work, a refugee woman drowned in Lake St. Christopher in the years after World War II. Strong on style, characterization, and atmosphere.

** Mary Higgins Clark and Carol Higgins Clark: *Deck the Halls,* Simon & Schuster/Scribner, $18. Mary's lottery-winning amateur sleuth Alvirah Meehan joins forces with Carol's private eye Regan Reilly, whose mortician father is kidnapped while her mystery-writing mother is hospitalized with a broken leg. The Higgins Clark narrative and dialogue have their usual TV-movie simplicity, but the combination of sound plot carpentry (from the elder writer?) and humor (from the younger?) will please fans. I especially enjoyed a couple of funny paragraphs on a deceased 103-year-old and her 80-year-old son.

** Charles Meyer: *Maxwell,* The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, P.O. Box 122, Sauk City, WI 53583; $15. Small-town cop Jim Maxwell returns to Long Island for family reasons and helps former colleagues investigate the murder of a fellow officer. Apart from a good Queenian dying message, the plot, featuring a too-familiar surprise finish, is undistinguished. But good prose and pace keep the pages turning, and the relationship between Maxwell and his ailing father is effectively managed.

Vera Caspary's 1943 classic *Laura,* so memorably filmed by Otto Preminger, has been reissued as the first of a series of Hollywood mysteries (ibooks, $14), one of the various criminous projects of another Otto (Penzler). Beautifully written and constructed, the novel exemplifies a subgenre seldom practiced today: romantic suspense from the male viewpoint. The two pages of credits and

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notes on the film are so informative, I'd have liked even more.

Another distinguished reprint is Donald E. Westlake's *Kinds of Love, Kinds of Death* (Five Star, $22.95), originally published in 1966 under the pseudonym Tucker Coe. Disgraced ex-cop Mitch Tobin is asked by a gangster to find out which of his partners in organized crime murdered his mistress. Westlake's new introduction made me want to take another look at Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man.*

The bull market in historical detection is reflected in three recent anthologies. *Crime Through Time III* (Berkley, $6.99), an all-new collection edited by Sharan Newman, leads off with a solid new case for Steven Saylor's Gordianus the Finder. Two other series sleuths, Leonard Tourney's Matthew Stock and Bruce Alexander's Sir John Fielding, are represented by stories strong on period flavor but relatively weak in puzzle. Elizabeth Foxwell and Margaret Coel make promising fictional sleuths of historical figures Alice Roosevelt and Molly (in real life Maggie) Brown respectively. Andrew Greeley's "The Case of the Murdered Pope," with its fascinating closing note, suggests the priest-novelist may be better at short-story length. Peter Robinson's "Murder in Utopia" is typically fine, with a closing line of melancholy resonance.

In *Murder Most Confederate* (Cumberland, $19.95), Martin H. Greenberg gathers fifteen originals, plus reprints by Avram Davidson and Ed Gorman, concerning the losing but traditionally more romanticized Southern side. *EQMM* stalwarts with impressive new stories include Doug Allyn, Edward D. Hoch, Brendan DuBois, and John Lutz. Allyn and DuBois also contribute to *Murder Most Medieval* (Cumberland, $19.95), edited by Greenberg and John Helfers, all originals save for Ellis Peters's Brother Cadfael tale "A Light on the Road to Woodstock."

Cumberland House, a rich new source of distinguished anthologies, also offers *Opening Shots: Great Mystery and Crime Writers Share Their First Published Stories* ($24.95), edited by Lawrence Block. In the pattern of the early MWA anthology *Maiden Murders* (1952), writers as varied as Max Allan Collins, Dorothy Salisbury Davis, Joan Hess, Sara Paretsky, Peter Robinson, Minette Walters, Donald E. Westlake, and editor Block introduce their first short stories, some of them tyro efforts, others ventures into the short story mode by writers already established as novelists. The informative introductions alone are worth the price of admission.

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Art by Mark Evans

The Day Hollywood Stood Still

by Loren D. Estleman

"*Klaatu barada nikto.*"

"I'm sorry?"

In confusion, Valentino repeated the phrase. "You know," he said. "From the original. If Patricia Neal got it wrong, Michael Rennie was dead. I thought it might break the ice."

Quincy Dundrear, twenty-four, with his head shaved clean as a stone and one nostril pierced with a pearl the size of a thumbtack, scratched his chest through a black T-shirt with a pair of pigs making love on the front. His last two pictures had made a billion and a half for Fox.

"I thought you were remaking *The Day the Earth Stood Still,*" Valentino said. "If you've forgotten everything else about the film, you're sure to remember *Klaatu barada nikto.*"

"I'll take your word for it. I never saw the picture. We're going a

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different direction this time. When the alien stops all the power on earth, the fire engines can't get around and L.A. burns to the ground."

"L. A.? The original took place in Washington, D.C."

The young director wrinkled his nose. The pearl looked like a giant zit. "Washington's so done since *Independence Day.* We're going to blow up the Hollywood Bowl and the Hall of Justice."

"What's Gort doing while all this is going on?"

"Gort?"

"The giant robot. The one Patricia Neal had to persuade to bring Michael Rennie back to life and save the world from destruction."

Valentino, Loren D. Estleman's film archivist sleuth, is back in a case for the science fiction buffs. Mr. Estleman divides his writing time between mysteries and Westerns, and has earned honors in both fields. He also writes mainstream books and is said to be "among the best of current American novelists" (*San Diego Union-Tribune*). His new mystery novel is *A Smile on the Face of the Tiger.* ¶

"Why would she want to do that? No explosions, no box office. You have to wonder how the industry got along before *The Terminator.*"

"So no Gort."

"If that's his name. We're making the robot small and cute, like R2-D2. Our villain's scary enough; an oil company CEO who wants to demolish a homeless center in East L. A. so he can drill for crude."

"He shouldn't have to drill too deep in this movie."

Valentino shifted his weight in the beanbag chair. Dundrear's office was done entirely in early seventies, complete with orange shag wall-to-wall and *Charlie's Angels* posters in frames. The director was leaning against one of those clunky dark-veneer-over-chipboard desks with phony chisel marks.

He looked at his watch, a gold Rolex on a chain around his bare neck. "Who did you say sent you?"

"UCLA. I'm with the Film Preservation Department. We have the master print of the 1951 *Day the Earth Stood Still* and we want to strike a new print and digitally enhance the soundtrack for video re-release, to coincide with the premiere of your version. We'll divide the profits with Fox in return for distribution rights. Your producer likes the idea, but he suggested I talk to you so we're all on the same page."

"What'll you do with your end?"

"Invest it in film preservation. Did you know ninety percent of

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all movies made before sound are lost forever? We want to prevent such attrition in the future."

"Why?"

"Well, as a cinematic artist yourself, I'm sure you agree that the classics of the form should remain available for appreciation and study. You must have gone to film school."

"I quit tenth grade to direct rock videos. I went from there to TV commercials. In between jobs, I shot a slasher flick on a ten-thousand-dollar budget. It grossed two million domestic, and here I am."

"Why'd you choose to remake a picture you haven't seen and care nothing about?"

"Financing. All these rich computer geeks sat through it a thousand times. The title alone saved making a pitch. They couldn't turn out their Swiss bank accounts fast enough. From what I hear, there were almost no special effects in the original; that'll add the extra half-hour the running time needs and dress up the trailer. Also there's a babe, an obnoxious kid, and a jerk boyfriend. The casting call will look like an episode of *Entertainment Tonight.*"

"Who plays the alien?"

"Jim Carrey's looking for a change of pace."

Valentino needed a change too. "What about the rights to distribute the original?"

"Officially I have no control over that, but if the studio agrees to give them to you, I'll walk. The last thing I need is another property competing with mine."

"That doesn't say much for your property."

Dundrear's tongue came out when he smiled. A silver stud glittered in the ambient light. "When *Godzilla* tanked the first weekend, sales and rentals on the original spiked up forty percent. If the videotape hadn't been available, the new film might have made back its investment Saturday night. I didn't get this job by sitting around letting history repeat itself."

"In that case we have nothing to talk about." Valentino stood.

"Stay in touch. I'll send you two tickets to the premiere."

"No, thanks. I'll wait till it comes out on video."

Franklin Poll, Quincy Dundrear's producer, had changed in the years since his first directorial effort, a gritty crime drama set in his native Chicago, had revolutionized the gangster movie. He'd put on weight, shorn his curly locks, and trimmed his beard, now streaked generously with silver; but the eyes behind the granny glasses were bright, and his voice was youthful. He welcomed Valentino back into his office with a firm handshake and sat him down in his prized Eames chair. The walls were paneled in teak and bare but for a huge original four-sheet poster of *Captain*

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Blood mounted behind the desk, where his Oscar for Best Direction stood on display. Poll took a seat on the Eames footstool with his hands gripping his thighs.

"What did you think of Quincy?"

"Not much," Valentino said. "He's a snotty kid well on his way to becoming a full-grown jackass."

"Agreed. But a jackass with talent. How he manages his narrative pace without leaving half his audience in the dust is beyond me. In film school, we thought the screwball comedies of the thirties moved quickly, but *Bloodslide* makes *Blonde Crazy* look like *Ivan the Terrible.*"

"If you told him, he wouldn't know what you're talking about. He has little interest in cinema history and less respect."

"He's not alone. This new crowd knows only jump cuts and blackouts. They grew up on MTV. But they bring the kids into the theaters, and that's all the studios care about." The adolescent tenor took on a bitter edge.

"He said he'd quit the picture if Fox gives UCLA the distribution rights to the original *Day the Earth Stood Still.*"

"I was afraid of that. He wouldn't know it, but he'd be right at home in the old Hollywood with that attitude. We almost lost the Fredric March *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in 1941 because MGM didn't want it to compete with the Spencer Tracy version. They bought up every print and ordered them destroyed. Those old moguls were ruthless businessmen."

"You're not going to let him get away with it, are you?"

Poll spread his hands. His fingerprints had been worn off by contact with miles and miles of safety stock. "I'm up a tree. The industry's in love with Quincy just now. When he has his first flop, I'll get back some leverage."

"He's doing a hack job on one of the most significant pictures of the Nuclear Age. That's his business—and Fox's—but no one has the right to censor a classic for any reason. Especially not when it's for his own selfish ends."

"Calm down, Val. Wait till Quincy's package leaves the theaters. If it's a hit, he won't care if the original shares the video racks with the remake, and if it falls on its face, it won't matter."

Valentino struggled to his feet; the best-engineered chair in the world was almost impossible to get out of. "No pipsqueak Roger Corman is going to stand in the way of cinema art. This isn't the end."

Poll smiled crookedly in his beard. "That line's got whiskers. You ought to get out and see a new movie every now and then. It will brighten up your dialogue."

"*Down to the Loop* was the first great Hollywood film since *Lawrence of Arabia,*" Valentino said at the door. "It restored my

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faith in the industry. I never thought the man who shot it would end up just another schlockmeister."

The smile turned sour. "It doesn't happen all at once. It's the death of a thousand cuts."

He had an appointment in Tarzana with a retired U. S. Navy cameraman who claimed to be sitting on 25,000 feet of battle film unseen since World War II, but he called and postponed. For once in his life, Valentino hadn't the stomach to discuss old movies. Instead, he went home to his private screening room and watched the master of *The Day the Earth Stood Still.* By the time Michael Rennie, as the messenger from outer space, broke into the study of Sam Jaffe's Einstein-like scientific genius to correct his arithmetic, Valentino was enthralled and at peace.

His door buzzer sounded just as Rennie was delivering the doomsday speech at the end. Valentino waited until the flying saucer took off, the camera following it into the cosmos, and then the closing credits, while the buzzer razzed again. He turned off the projector and went out to answer.

"Did I get you out of bed?" The flat blue eyes of the stranger on the doorstep took in Valentino's fully dressed condition without expression.

"I was watching a movie. May I help you?"

The man showed a gold badge attached to a pigskin folder. "McPherson. I'm a sergeant with L. A. Homicide. You're Valentino?"

Nodding, he felt a smile coming on. "*Mark* McPherson? Like in *Laura?*"

"Henry. I wish you Hollywood types would get your heads out of pictures once in a while."

"Sorry, I should know better. Has there been a murder in the neighborhood?"

"Can I come in?"

Valentino stepped aside. The sergeant had fair hair and delicate features and was probably routinely carded whenever he entered a bar. His blue suit was inexpensive but fit his slight frame snugly. His gaze swept the living room and alighted on his host. "Where were you this evening?"

"Here. I said I was watching a movie. It *isn't* a neighborhood murder, is it?"

"What makes you say that?"

"If it were, you'd be treating me more as a witness than a suspect. To answer your next question, I've been alone all evening. There's no one to verify I didn't go out. Who's dead?"

"A director at Twentieth Century Fox named Quincy Dundrear. You had a fight with him this afternoon."

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Valentino felt shock, then a great emptiness. He didn't mourn Dundrear so much as a life snuffed out so early.

"It wasn't a fight," he said. "He didn't see eye to eye on a matter I thought important. Who'd you talk to, Franklin Poll?"

"Most innocent people would be curious to hear how Dundrear was killed."

"Why should that matter to anyone but the police? I've been involved in homicide investigations before, Sergeant. I'm not as curious as I was in the beginning."

McPherson's eyes were like cheap enamel, without depth. They were unreadable. "I understand you're some kind of film historian. How is it you've been involved in homicide investigations?"

"My business cards identify me as a film *detective,* which describes the main part of my work more accurately. I track down and collect lost films, often in bits and pieces. I travel a great deal, and it's a competitive market. Since videos entered the picture, it's become a lucrative one as well. Where there's money, there's often murder."

"Fair answer. A little glib."

"I watch a lot of movies. The dialogue rubs off."

"Uh-huh. Somebody beat Dundrear to death, probably with a baseball bat, sometime between six-thirty, when his secretary went home, and seven-fifteen, when the janitor found his body. There was plenty of blood."

"My God."

"The autopsy will tell us more. It was definitely a rage killing. You fought with Dundrear over movie distribution rights. When Franklin Poll backed him up, you said,"—he took out a spiral notepad and flipped it open to a dog-eared page—"'No pipsqueak Roger Corman is going to stand in the way of cinema art. This isn't the end.' Some people would consider that a threat." He flipped the pad shut and put it away.

"I meant I'd go over Poll's head. He doesn't run the studio and neither does Dundrear."

"But you didn't go over his head. You canceled an appointment you had and went home. According to you."

"If you know I canceled an appointment, you checked with my secretary. I told her when I called I was going home. I needed to cool off before I talked to anyone else."

"So you admit you were angry."

"I'm angry now. An arrogant punk like Dundrear is bound to have plenty of enemies. You ought to save some energy for the others. I didn't kill him, Sergeant."

McPherson stirred, produced a pager, and asked for a telephone. Valentino pointed it out next to the armchair from the *Maltese*

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Falcon set. The sergeant dialed, listened, said, "Be there in twenty," and hung up. His eyes were still unreadable.

"We'll continue this later. That was an all-units call. We got a bomb threat."

"Where?"

"Fox."

Alone, Valentino turned on the TV. All the local stations were covering the story, but none had details. Cameras on the street captured only barricades and police from the bomb squad suiting up in lead shields and visored helmets that reminded him of Gort the robot in the movie he'd watched earlier. Helicopter footage showed only the roofs of office buildings and sound stages at Fox and flashing red and blue lights on the ground.

After thirty minutes, the scene switched to a room at City Hall, where a police inspector named Harrison, with gold leaf on his cap visor, announced to the press that the threat had been made by an anonymous caller to a nightside employee shortly after nine that evening, and that sixteen soundstages had been evacuated while police conducted a search for the explosive device.

"J. R. Roberts, *L.A. Times,*" announced one reporter. "What can you tell us about the caller?"

"The studio employee said it was an adult male voice with what sounded like a Brooklyn, New York, accent."

Another reporter, who introduced himself as Jack Fell from the *San Diego Union,* asked, "What were his exact words?"

Harrison consulted his notes. " 'You have twenty-four hours before one of your sound stages is reduced to a burned-out cinder.' We take that to mean he was referring to an incendiary device."

While the inspector fielded a question about the possible motive, Valentino called police headquarters. He persuaded a sleepy-sounding officer to page Sergeant McPherson and give him Valentino's number. Ten minutes later McPherson called.

"It's just a hunch," Valentino said. "Quincy Dundrear was directing a remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still.* At the end of the original film, Michael Rennie threatens to 'reduce your world'—meaning *our* world—'to a burned-out cinder' if the earth doesn't stop meddling in outer space. Those were the same words used in the bomb threat. It could be a fanatic fan."

"Probably a coincidence." But the sergeant sounded less irritated than he had a moment before.

"What have you got to lose by beginning your search with whatever sound stage Dundrear was shooting on? Franklin Poll can give you that information."

"Maybe the bomber got the same information from Dundrear."

"He could be the killer."

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"He could still be you."

"Not with you as my alibi. You and I were standing in my living room when the bomber called in the threat."

"Don't go anywhere. I'll be in touch."

Valentino went to bed. The telephone in the bedroom woke him at six. It was McPherson. He sounded tired.

"We found it. It was on Sound Stage Eight, where they're building the sets for *The Day the Earth Stood Still.* It was an incendiary with a mercury switch on a digital timer, set to go off at nine P.M. The Bomb Squad defused it."

"Glad I could help."

"We're not making it public yet, and we asked Fox to shut down operations for today to make it look good. If this guy thinks we're still looking for the bomb, he won't think we're looking for him. You should have heard them scream."

"Hollywood. Time is millions. A bomb is just a big noise."

"Yeah. We're tracing the components, but that takes time. What do you know about fanatic fans?"

"Sci-fi buffs often have high IQs," Valentino said. "Their social skills usually aren't as impressive. When they're not attending *Star Trek* conventions, a lot of them live in front of their computers. If this one's aim was to stop a cheesy remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still,* I'd look for a Web site specializing in pre-sixties science-fiction trivia."

"How many thousands of those can there be?"

"Narrow it down to those you can trace to local addresses."

McPherson paused. "You're still a suspect. You could have rigged the bombing to distract us from the murder investigation."

"Get some sleep, Sergeant. You're starting to sound like Boston Blackie."

The morning news reported no new developments in the bombing investigation. Valentino took the master print he'd watched to UCLA and signed in the reels with the librarian in charge of the vault. Ruth, the ancient Cerberus of a secretary in whose services he held part interest, intercepted him outside his tiny office and told him he had a message from a Sergeant McPherson at police headquarters. "Been stealing office supplies again?"

"That was one roll of splicing tape, ten years ago," he said. "Do you ever forget anything?"

"Only every time Harry Cohn tried to get me on his casting couch. He says he'll pick you up downstairs in ten minutes."

"Who, Harry Cohn?"

"Funny guy. I don't need this job, you know. If I ever decided to open my mouth, I could own MGM."

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"Forget it, Ruth. Everyone you could blackmail is dead."

"Serves me right for being discreet."

He stepped outside just as an unmarked green Chrysler drove up and McPherson told him to get in. The sergeant looked older and drawn, but he'd changed into a gray suit. As they took off, Valentino asked him if he'd managed to rest.

"I went home and took a shower. Know anything about computers?"

"A little. I'm no hacker."

"I am. These days everyone has a specialty. I figure what you know about fan Web sites can help. Does the name Ernest Sizemore mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing."

"He's got a site devoted entirely to *The Day the Earth Stood Still.* We traced it to an apartment on Sepulveda. We've got men on the scene. Landlady says he works days, but she doesn't know where, always comes home around three. Wait till you see his place."

"He can't be the only one who's crazy about that film. Even in L.A. I could yell out *'Klaatu barada nikto'* on any street and get a positive response."

"Yeah, well, you remember the guy who called in the bomb threat had a Brooklyn accent? According to the landlady, Sizemore moved here three years ago from Flushing."

"That's promising."

"It gets better. We checked him with Social Security. Until he got fired last year for showing up late too many times, he worked in Special Effects at Twentieth Century Fox. He's a demolitions expert."

"Step on it," Valentino said. When the sergeant turned his head to scowl at him, he grinned. "I always wanted to say that."

The apartment was on the fourth floor of a building whose elevator had been out of order since Governor Brown. It was one room with a pull-down bed and dozens of reproduction posters and original lobby cards, in frames, advertising the 1951 version of *The Day the Earth Stood Still.* There was a cramped water closet, a hot plate, and a Macintosh computer with a bullet-shaped monitor and a seventeen-inch screen. The screen saver looked like a revolving agitator from a washing machine, but was actually the spangled interior wall of the circular corridor in Klaatu the alien's saucer-shaped spaceship.

McPherson had left instructions with a plainclothesman in the lobby to call him on his walkie-talkie in five minutes. It crackled. He unclipped it from his belt and spoke into it. "Working. Hit the button when anyone starts upstairs. Let 'em pass." He returned

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the radio to his belt and rattled some keys on the computer board. When the Web site appeared, the eerie theremin score from the movie came out of the speakers on the sides. Animated icons of Gort, Klaatu in his flight suit, and the flying saucer jigged across the screen.

"Most of the pages are filled with trivia questions and answers," said the sergeant. "He's got a file blocked out by an access code. I could run some at random, but I thought you might have some specific ideas, knowing the film."

Valentino sat in the office chair before the monitor. "It's a little long, but I'll try *'Klaatu barada nikto.'"* He pecked out the phrase.

A box appeared onscreen with the words ACCESS DENIED—INCORRECT PASSWORD inside.

He tried each of the three words separately and got the same message. "Gort" failed next. "Carpenter," Klaatu's alias when posing as a human, was equally disappointing. He tried the names of each of the major characters. He was glad he'd watched the film so recently. When the last, "Bernhardt," didn't work, he tried "burned-out cinder," then each of the three words separately. Nothing.

He sat back, chewing the inside of a cheek, while McPherson checked his watch. What was it Klaatu had said to the robot when he wanted to go into the saucer? The word made him think of a dance: Mambo? Samba? Surely not Lambada. He closed his eyes, willing himself out of the tiny apartment and into the movie. After a moment he smiled. "Meringue."

"What?"

He shook his head and manipulated the keys: MARENGA. The icons continued to jig for another second. Then the screen switched images. The new one resembled a blueprint.

"Floor plan," he said.

"It sure is." McPherson leaned close to the screen. "Only someone who worked at Fox or spent as much time in the building as I did last night would recognize it. It's Sound Stage Eight."

The walkie-talkie crackled. He turned it off, drew a flat pistol from the holster on the other side of his belt, and told Valentino to step into the little water closet and shut the door.

"The city's high on good relations with the studios." Waiting for the light at Cahuenga to change, McPherson rubbed his bloodshot eyes. "Franklin Poll wants to thank the men responsible for collaring Sizemore, so instead of going home to sleep, I get to run you over to Fox and collect a pat on the head."

"I heard Sizemore confessed," Valentino said. A day had passed since the arrest on Sepulveda. The bomber, a small man with a prematurely bald head, had submitted without resistance.

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"To planting the bomb and making the threat. He was a disgruntled employee, plus he'd heard when he was working there that Quincy Dundrear was going to hack the remake. He decided to take his revenge *and* strike a blow for the original. He sounds a little like you. You can see why you made a good suspect."

"He hasn't taken the blame for Dundrear's murder?"

"Not yet. He will. A lot of perps cop to the lesser charge first."

"I hope you're right. I can't help wondering why he'd bother to plant the bomb after killing the director. That would have shut down the project just as well."

"So he's the careful type. Belt and suspenders."

"Then why make the call? He'd killed once; why give Fox the chance to evacuate the rest of its employees?"

"If you keep asking questions you'll talk yourself back into being a suspect." The light changed. McPherson drove on.

Franklin Poll's outer office was filled with visitors, all of whom glanced up from their magazines and manicures when the intercom buzzed. There had been a subtle shift of power in the studio, Valentino could tell; Poll had once again become The Man to See. The attractive Asian receptionist smiled up at the newcomers and told them to go on in.

Poll sprang up from behind his desk and vaulted across the room to shake McPherson's hand and then Valentino's. He looked nearly as youthful as he sounded. The only grave thing about him was the black armband stitched to his right sleeve.

"Splendid job, gentlemen," he greeted them. "Quincy is a great loss, but I don't mind telling you how good the morale is around here since you put that animal behind bars so quickly."

McPherson said, "We caught a couple of breaks. One of them was Valentino here."

Poll shook a finger at Valentino. "I know what *you'd* like, and it's yours. When *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is in the can, UCLA will have exclusive distribution rights to the original. Mind, I don't know when that will be. We have to find a new director, and when a major studio is forced to stop production for an entire day, there's no telling how long it will take to get back up to speed."

"Congratulations, Franklin. Looks like you're back in charge."

"I'm a survivor. So's Quincy, in a way. The new film will be dedicated to him, of course, and there's talk of naming a special award for him at the Academy."

That was it. Valentino had been aware that there was something different about Poll's office. He'd thought it was the mood of its occupant, but now he knew. "Where is *your* Oscar, by the way?" The desk was empty of everything but the telephone and intercom.

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"I took it home. It seemed disrespectful to keep it on display after what happened to Quincy." Poll spoke quickly.

"Maybe it just needs cleaning."

"Cleaning? No." The producer looked away.

Valentino said, "Sizemore's a demolitions expert. When it came to shutting down the studio, he'd go to his strength. Bludgeoning a director to death is an amateur play. Something a desperate producer might do when he sees all his authority passing into the hands of a punk who ought to be shooting dog-food commercials."

"Sergeant McPherson, has anyone from a studio asked you about becoming a technical advisor? It pays well, and you won't have to give up your job with the city."

McPherson was wide awake. "I think I'd like a look at that Oscar. The M.E. found traces of gold in Dundrear's skull."

For a moment it looked as if Poll were undecided whether to call his receptionist or bolt for the door. The sergeant drew his pistol.

Valentino went over and put a hand on the producer's shoulder. "It's bad casting, Franklin. You can't bring it off."

A string seemed to snap inside Poll, then. Valentino caught his weight and maneuvered him into the Eames chair.

"Get that bottle!" McPherson shouted.

The producer had taken a plastic prescription container from an inside pocket. Valentino clawed it out of his fist and read the label. "Valium." He put it in his own pocket.

"I'm an old fool." Poll was sitting now with his head tilted back, gripping the arms of the chair tightly as if to avoid slipping to the floor. "I took the Oscar with me to his office. I thought I could shame him into doing honor to a project that would bear my name as producer. It didn't mean anything to him."

"How could it?" Valentino asked. "He didn't pay his dues, like you."

"He said he knew a shop on Sunset where he could have one made for twenty bucks and put any name he wanted on the plaque. *'Deep Throat,'* he said. 'Best Performance by an Orifice.' I didn't even know I was hitting him until the statue got so slippery it slid out of my hands. I picked it up and walked out of his office. It's there, in the bottom drawer of my desk. I didn't even try to clean it."

Valentino stepped that way and opened the drawer. He looked at McPherson and nodded.

"Call headquarters," the sergeant said. "Ask for Lieutenant Carl Decker. Tell him I need a couple of uniforms."

Poll's eyes rolled Valentino's way. He looked old behind the granny glasses. "I'm sorry, Val."

"You shouldn't meddle outside your sphere." Valentino lifted the receiver. ●

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Enter the Vulture

by Michael Gilbert

No. 2 Area (East) of the Metropolitan Police District is served by three substations: Leman Street, Cable Street, and the Isle of Dogs (usually shortened in speech to "C.3"). The head of C.3 at that time was Detective Inspector Scratton.

"A good man, Toby Scratton," said Mr. Piggin, the managing clerk of Fearne and Bracknell, solicitors. "He's been very helpful to me, on more than one occasion."

"Indeed, yes," said Francis Fearne. "And we've had a number of useful clients through him. The Lampards, the Coxes, Major Bessingham, and, recently, Edward Freudinger."

Michael Gilbert's remarkable career in the mystery field includes the writing of nearly three dozen radio and television dramas, several plays for the theater, thirty-odd novels, and dozens of short stories. The Fearne and Bracknell series, to which this new tale belongs, has appeared only in *EQMM*. There are, to date, no novels employing the characters. We hope the series will eventually be collected in book form. ✝

Freudinger was a notable citizen, and wealthy. He had been married twice, each marriage presenting him with one son and one daughter. The eldest of the four Freudinger children was now twenty-four, the youngest ten.

"Edward Freudinger," said Fearne, "came to me when his second wife, Amelia, died so unexpectedly last May. I would assume that he was, to start with, in a state of shock. I could picture him living alone in that vast house of his in Belgrave Street, prowling round the rooms like an unhappy ghost."

Bob Bracknell said, "And are his children no help to him?"

"They should be. But I don't know that they are. The son and daughter by his first marriage are in their early twenties, and busy getting on with their own lives. The son and daughter that Amelia produced are both at boarding school. He'd see them in the holidays, but in term time the only other inhabitants of his house are a married couple who come in daily to look after the house and garden."

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"Long, lonely evenings," said Fearne's daughter, Tara. "A recipe for suicide."

"No. I'm sure the thought of self-destruction never enters his head. It would be an admission of defeat. He's too strong for that. But it made him start thinking about the future. About what was going to happen when *he* died. Quite a normal reaction at seventy. What did seem unbelievable to me was that a man with his considerable fortune, and the family connections arising from two marriages, should never have made a will."

"I trust," said Bob, "that you pointed out to him the difficulties and dangers of intestacy."

"Of course. He not only agreed with me, but he approved of the will I drew up for him. A simple, straightforward document. A few personal bequests, including, at his insistence, one for me. I am to have the choice of any six books in his library. I must confess that I worded it like that because there was a beautifully illustrated six-volume work on the birds of South America that I had long coveted. Apart from such bequests, his estate is to be divided into four equal parts, to be held in trust for his children."

"Well, that settles him," said Mr. Piggin. "And very satisfactorily. There was one other matter I wanted to raise. When I was over at C.3 yesterday, Inspector Scratton had another client to offer us."

"Another Edward Freudinger?"

"Hardly," said Mr. Piggin with a smile. "This was a man called Dines. Gregory Dines. I said I'd put it up to you. Though he didn't strike me as being a particularly desirable client, I guessed he'd been getting into Scratton's hair and he wanted to get rid of him."

"So that he could get into our hair," said Bob Bracknell.

"We're paid to share other people's burdens," said Fearne.

"True," said Mr. Piggin. "But if we did take him on, we'd have to realise that he wouldn't be able to pay the smallest bill. He seems to be a little man who lives in a garret on five hundred and twenty pounds a year paid to him weekly by a private benefactor. Never having been in regular employment, he's made no pension contributions. In fact, his main endeavour seems to have been to steer clear of all officialdom."

Fearne knew that such people did exist. Small animals that contrived to creep through holes in the net of state security, preferring to tuck themselves away, out of sight.

Bob said, "If he's so careful to keep himself to himself—can't say I blame him—but why is he troubling the police?"

"Because, for the last six weeks, people have been trying to kill him."

"What people?"

"He doesn't know."

"And why?"

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"He doesn't know that, either."

Fearne and Bracknell looked at each other.

"Are we to assume that he is imagining the whole thing?"

"If so, he has a very vivid imagination. He told Scratton the whole story. Apparently there have been three attempts so far. The first was a straightforward attempt to push him under a lorry. The pavement on which he was walking was crowded, the attack was from behind, and he never actually saw the man who pushed him. He rolled clear of the lorry, which fortunately possessed excellent brakes, and he escaped everything except a storm of abuse from the lorry driver. By the time he had been picked up and dusted down, and forcibly told to keep his bloody eyes open and look where he was bloody going, it was far too late to think of identifying his attacker."

"He's sure that it wasn't his own carelessness?"

"Absolutely sure. He says that he felt a hand in the small of his back propelling him into the traffic."

"How long ago was this?"

"Five or six weeks. He remembers it clearly because he had led a very secluded life and this was the first time that anything like that had happened to him."

Fearne said, "And then?"

"The second attempt took place a week later. The garret he lives in is the top storey of an old-fashioned house, divided into four or five flats. Two men broke into the house and forced the door of his attic. He got out of the window—he's an agile little monkey—shinned down a pipe, and spent the rest of the night among the bushes."

"You speak of a door being forced. That is something that can hardly be done quietly. Did none of the people living on the other floors hear anything?"

"Apparently not. Or, anyway, they have not come forward to say so."

"I see. Well, continue."

"The third attempt was more elaborate. Nowadays, when he leaves his attic, he is careful to fasten a piece of black cotton between the door and the jamb. Some days later he found the cotton broken and knew that his room had been visited. As you can imagine, he made a very careful search, without being sure what he was looking for. At first it seemed that nothing had been disturbed. The cotton might, he thought, have been broken by a cat—a tabby brute whose owner starved it, that came scratching at his door for scraps. On the table beside his bed there was a glass of water—like many people, he kept it ready to drink at night. It struck him that it had been moved. He dipped his finger into the water and touched the tip of his tongue with it. The bitter taste was quite apparent. He poured some milk into a saucer, added the

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water from the glass, and went out, leaving the door ajar. He was away for perhaps an hour, doing some shopping. When he came back the cat was on the floor, rigid and stone dead."

"Only strychnine would work as fast as that."

"So he assumed."

"And no doubt he had the milk and water analysed."

"No doubt he should have done. In fact, he emptied the mixture down the drain and carefully washed out both the glass and the saucer."

"Why?"

"He says that it was too dangerous to keep them about the place."

This produced a thoughtful silence.

"So there is no proof that the three incidents really happened."

"None at all," Mr. Piggin said, "and the most remarkable part of the whole business is what you might call its timing."

"What do you mean?"

"Assuming, for the moment, that they really occurred, does it not strike you as odd that all three of the attempts should have taken place during the last six weeks? How is it that little Mr. Dines, harmless to everyone for many years, should suddenly have become dangerous to people with the money and the muscle to organise his removal? Particularly since he seems, from all accounts, to have had no enemies."

"It's odd," agreed Fearne, "but it's clear that he's not a desirable client for us."

Tara, who had stayed behind when the others departed to get on with the day's work, sat herself down opposite her father, put her plump elbows on the table, and said, "What are you worrying about, Dad?"

"Who said I was worrying?"

"I always know when you've got something on your mind. You start rearranging everything on the top of your desk."

"Do I really? I'd never noticed." He moved a soapstone idol which had got itself isolated behind a pile of law books and put it back in its proper place beside a letter scale. Then he said, "Very well, Sherlock. I *am* worried."

"About Mr. Dines?"

"No. About Edward."

"I thought you said that once you'd got his will signed up he was all right."

"If I said anything like that, it means that I hadn't really thought the matter through."

"And now that you have?"

Fearne hesitated. He was clearly picking his words carefully.

"I think," he said, "that I visualised Edward as a sick animal.

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Sick almost to death. Wandering, lost, on the prairie. In such a case, you may be sure there would be sharp eyes monitoring his stumbling progress. High up in the sky a vulture is hovering. Waiting for the dying animal to go down, try to rise, and fail. It will not be long now before it can swoop down and get busy with beak and claws. Do you see the picture?"

"It's a horrible picture," said Tara. "Who is your vulture?"

"If I knew that," said Fearne, "I could take steps to deal with it. As it is, we shall just have to wait and see."

They did not have to wait long.

It was less than a month from the time when Tara spoke to her father that the letter arrived. It was from a firm of solicitors, Jocelynne and Zambetta, known to but not approved by Fearne. It came over the signature of the senior partner, Cyril Jocelynne. After normal compliments, it said:

> Pursuant to the provisions of the Marriage Act, 1931, acting on behalf of Monica Marian Lewin of 20 Ben Jonson Road, Putney, we have given notice to the Superintendent Registrar of that district of the intended marriage between our client and Edward Freudinger of The Old House, Belgrave Street, Putney. We understand that you act for the latter party and we would be obliged if you would confirm to us by post that you have duly received this notice.

"Enter the vulture," said Tara, to whom, along with the other partners in the firm and their clerk, Mr. Piggin, Fearne had read out the letter.

"Monica Lewin," said Fearne. "Do we know her?" Bob, Bob's son Hugo, and Tara, appealed to separately, all shook their heads. Mr. Piggin said, apologetically, "I only heard the name for the first time yesterday. I was given it by a friend in the Registrar's Office who knew I was interested in Freudinger, and had spotted the name when the notice arrived. So I have only had twenty-four hours to look into Monica. But I can offer you a few facts which you may find relevant. Her mother was a Welsh girl who ran away to Brazil, where she encountered a Brazilian businessman called Alfredo Lewin, and married him. He died some years ago, but her mother's still living in São Paulo, comfortably off on her husband's money. Monica was their only child. When she reached what you might laughingly call years of discretion, finding life in São Paulo a bit dull, she came over to try her luck in this country."

"Half Welsh, half Brazilian. Sounds a dangerous sort of mixture."

"You can say that again. Her next few years seem to have been filled with affairs with everyone she met, from a handsome young

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man who came to clean the windows, and thence onwards and upwards. One of her more recent captures is said to have been a bank manager."

"Interesting," said Bob. "But do we need to worry about her? Edward's an obstinate old cuss, and unless she can persuade him to change his will and make another one, in her favour, she won't get much out of her manoeuvres."

Fearne said, "When you speak of her manoeuvres, is it possible that you have overlooked the real point of them?"

"The real point?" said Bob—then, "Oh yes. I see what you're getting at. Of course, if she can bring off this marriage, Edward's existing will is automatically revoked."

"Which takes her halfway to the winning post," said Fearne. "If she can't persuade Edward to make a new will in her favour, he is, and will remain, intestate, and when he dies Monica gets the generous share of his estate that the Intestates Estate Act awards her. A life interest in half the residue and a lump sum of five thousand pounds."

"Not forgetting," said Bob, "the personal chattels. Not that they could amount to a great deal."

"You may be surprised to learn—particularly when you consider what an illiterate old pirate Edward is—that by far the most valuable of his possessions is his library. We had a man from Bullits to do the evaluation, and he couldn't help chuckling when he demonstrated that half the books were not only unread, but couldn't be read. They were uncut. 'Makes them even more valuable,' he said. Also the fact that a lot of them were still in their wrappers. Apparently this also adds to their value. I confess I was a bit sad when I saw that the six volumes of South American birds has been priced at one thousand, five hundred pounds."

"And when you think," said Bob, "that the widow would have the right—which I'm sure she'd exercise—to take a lump sum as the capitalised value of her life interest, all in all she'd walk away with at least a quarter of a million pounds."

"Lucky vulture," said Tara. "I suppose there's nothing we can do to scare her off her prey?"

"I've been thinking about that," said Fearne. "I don't think there's much chance of frightening her off, but we can, at least, see that things are done in an orderly and unhurried way. If Edward makes no further will and dies intestate, a first and necessary step will be an application to the court to take out Letters of Administration of his estate. Since we act for Edward, that will, of course, have to be done by us. Jocelynne and Zambetta will be involved on behalf of the widow. In the circumstances, the court would, no doubt, favour the appointment of joint administrators, myself and Jocelynne. And since no positive step can be taken in

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the administration without my agreement, I can at least see that nothing is done over-hastily."

This produced a smile from Tara, who remembered the senior partner being described, on one occasion, as "the most obstinate and obstructive solicitor in the City of London."

"You're assuming," said Bob, "that this marriage actually comes off."

"From what I have heard," said Mr. Piggin, "I think you can safely make such an assumption. Monica is clearly a most determined young lady. She will, I imagine, have taken that flat in Ben Jonson Road—almost next door to Edward's house—with two objectives. To be, herself, within the jurisdiction of the Putney Registrar, and to have a convenient headquarters from which to conduct her campaign. She has already taken the first step, I hear, by installing herself as Edward's housekeeper."

"Step one, into the kitchen," said Hugo. "Step two, into the bedroom."

"I'm afraid that's right," said Fearne. "She's got her hooks into him. She won't let him go now."

Nor did she.

On March 28th Fearne was notified that a certificate of marriage between Edward Freudinger and Monica Marian Lewin had been entered by the Putney Registrar. The requisite twenty-one days had expired since notice was given and no impediment had been recorded.

On June third, with the inevitability of something foreseen and unstoppable, Edward Freudinger died. The doctor who was attending him certified the causes of death as cardiac weakness and advanced senility.

Reporting these developments to his partners, Fearne said, "There is one odd thing, and that is the complete lack of friction between myself and Jocelynne. Joint administrations are never easy, but I must put it on record that my fellow administrator has been exceptionally cooperative. True, our work has been the more or less routine matter of starting to liquidate the assets of the estate. He might, for instance, have asked for an independent valuation of Monica's life interest. But no, he was happy to accept my expert's figure. His one objective seems to have been to get matters tidied up as quickly as possible. Indeed, I think we could have got a better price for Edward's house if we had been prepared to wait a little. There were several people showing an interest, but he agreed to settle with the first prospective purchaser *provided he agreed to an early completion date.*"

Bob said, "Here's something else that you may find significant. I asked Toby Scratton to keep a discreet eye on Monica's movements.

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His report has just come to hand. It seems that she has already made an open-date reservation on a transatlantic flight to Brazil."

Fearne said, "Clearly her intention is to grab the money and run. Indeed, if I hadn't managed to slow up the distribution on a number of technical grounds, she'd have been back with her mother in São Paolo by now, taking her winnings with her."

"And there's nothing we can do to stop her?"

"I haven't been able to think of anything. All the same, I've got a feeling that there is something wrong somewhere, but I'm damned if I can spot what it is."

He looked round for Mr. Piggin, whose customary chair was empty that morning.

"It's no use looking for Piggy," said Hugo. "He's off on some ploy of his own."

Although Mr. Piggin prided himself on the strict logic of his reasoning, he was capable, at times, of leaping from facts to conclusions with the agility of a grasshopper. If called on to justify this supra-normal activity, he would refer to it as instinct.

He, like Fearne, had a feeling that there was something wrong somewhere. The only point—but it was a significant point—that connected, in his mind, the history of Gregory Dines, as related to him by Inspector Scratton, with the affairs of Edward Freudinger, was one of timing.

The vital period in Edward Freudinger's life had been the final weeks when his mental capacity had started to diminish and finally to disappear and he had been awaiting death. This was the six weeks of his entrapment into marriage by Monica. *And it was precisely in those six weeks that repeated attempts had been made to kill Mr. Dines.*

Why?

Coincidence?

Mr. Piggin had no use for coincidences. Properly examined, a sequence of cause and effect could usually be established.

How was it that little Mr. Dines, who had, as far as one knew, lived a life of modest security for some years, should suddenly have become a danger that had to be removed? The only possible answer was that he had chanced on some information that threatened the developing schemes of Monica Lewin.

There was a subsidiary matter to be considered.

Was it not possible—or even likely—if the humble and parsimonious Mr. Dines lived almost entirely on his savings, supplemented by a periodical payment from a private source—that this payment was connected with the secret he had discovered?

Mr. Piggin's instinct imperiously directed him to find out.

A first step was to discover who the messenger was who brought

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Mr. Dines the money each week. With this in mind he had set out to ingratiate himself with the other tenants of 20 Barlands Road, in the top storey of which Mr. Dines roosted.

Fortunately, Mrs. Blazer, the tenant of the ground floor, on the left side of the main staircase, turned out to be a middle-aged and garrulous widow. Mr. Piggin had developed a faultless technique for dealing with people of this sort, and was soon enjoying a cup of tea and a heart-to-heart talk with Mrs. Blazer. It had not been necessary to offer her money. She was lonely and found Mr. Piggin an agreeable conversationalist and an appreciative listener. She was only too willing to discuss Mr. Dines and the mystery which seemed to surround him.

"Every Friday morning this young man arrives, regular as clockwork. Of course we were all curious. We did try to get him to tell us where he was from and what he was doing, but talk about oysters!"

Mr. Piggin saw that professional help was needed. Fortunately it was to hand in the person of Captain Smedley, a private enquiry agent who had assisted Mr. Piggin on a number of occasions in the past. He agreed to put one of his best men onto the job.

"He'll be there first thing next Friday—that's the day after tomorrow. He'll follow the man after he's delivered the cash. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me, but when we find out where he comes from and who's putting up the money, we may be able to see what's behind it. Seems to me it's got a smell of the old black about it."

Mr. Piggin agreed. He, too, had been thinking of blackmail.

At noon on the Friday, Captain Smedley telephoned.

"No problem," he said. "My man followed this chap straight back to his office."

"His office?"

"Well, not exactly his, but the one he works at. A firm of solicitors. Jocelynne and Zambetta."

Mr. Piggin experienced a modest feeling of triumph.

He said, "I *knew* there was some link between the two cases. This proves it. Jocelynne and Zambetta are Monica's solicitors. It seems clear that Dines has some information—some document—that threatens Monica. Something he can use to get money out of her."

"Odd sort of blackmail," said Smedley. "Most people on that game grab a lump sum and clear off with it. They don't organise themselves an annuity. What do you want me to do now?"

"What do you suggest?"

"Direct action. Shake down Mr. Dines. From what you tell me, he doesn't seem to be of much account. I expect we can scare him into telling us what we want to know."

"Then don't let's waste any time. He hangs out at the top of Twenty Barlands Road, with umpteen other tenants."

When they reached the house, they found Mrs. Blazer hanging

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round in the hall. She seemed relieved to see them. She said, "We were beginning to wonder what Mr. Dines was up to. Usually he's up and down the stairs half a dozen times a day. With his groceries, and his milk, and the papers and all that."

"And nobody's seen him today?"

"That's right. Nor heard him neither. Not a sound."

Mr. Piggin and Captain Smedley looked at each other. The same thought was in both their minds.

"Could be asleep, I suppose," said Mr. Piggin as they climbed up four flights of stairs.

"I don't think so," said the captain. "Nor do you."

The door of the attic flat was not locked. It swung open to the touch.

Mr. Dines was facedown in the middle of the floor. The people who had killed him had not thought him worth pistol or knife. They had simply hit him at the base of his skull, hard enough to break his neck. After that they had left him lying. Their attention, it seemed, had been concentrated on making a very careful and thorough search of his room.

In the next hour, before they summoned the police—which they should, of course, have done at once—Captain Smedley and Mr. Piggin traced the course of that search. It had left a sea of documents scattered over the floor.

"They started by turning out his pockets," said Mr. Piggin.

"Not turning them out," Smedley amended. "Tearing them out of his coat and his trousers."

The wrecked and emptied pockets lay among the papers on the floor. After which, it seemed, the intruders had started on the drawers of his writing table. The same treatment had been applied to them as to the pockets.

Smedley said, "I expect they'd heard of drawers with false backs and a hidden space behind them."

The ruthless use of a knife had explored this possibility, but apparently without the results that the searchers had been hoping for.

Finished with the living room, Captain Smedley and Mr. Piggin moved over to the annexe where Mr. Dines kept his bed. Equal violence had been employed there.

Examination of the papers they had extracted and scattered produced only unimportant documents, bills and invoices and a few personal letters. These were from Mr. Dines's only regular correspondent, a lady who signed her letters "Letitia" and filled them with biblical quotations.

"I'll have a word with her," said Smedley. "She lives just round the corner. But I don't imagine she'll be much help. Judging from her letters, she's halfway round the bend herself."

"Whilst you're at it," said Mr. Piggin, "I suppose you'd better

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alert the police. Inspector Scratton at the Isle of Dogs substation knows about Dines. In fact, he once offered him to us as a client. I'm glad we didn't take him on."

When Smedley had departed on this double errand, Mr. Piggin stood for long minutes beside the body of Mr. Dines.

Trivial in life, insignificant in death.

Captain Smedley, he reflected, was a professional. If the paper they were looking for had been there, he would surely have found it.

He cast a final eye round the room.

Its arrangement was as starkly simple as had been the life of its owner. He thought of rooms he had read about, exciting rooms, with hiding places concealed behind panels. Here the walls were brickwork, coated with roughcast. No secret panels here. The floors were boards, securely nailed to the joists below. He supposed that a carpenter, armed with the appropriate tools, could have raised them, but not without leaving clear signs of his work. The ceiling sneered down at him, blank and unhelpful.

The furniture was as simple as the room.

On the right as you came through the door, there was a shelf on which stood two vases of artificial flowers and a table lamp. Along the right-hand wall ran a two-tier bookcase holding few books, but several bundles of old newspapers and a number of magazines, most of which seemed to be devoted to physical culture. Did Mr. Dines spend his off-hours developing his muscles, or did he get a kick out of looking at the photographs of young men stripped for action?

Up against the far wall was a table, and on it a second lamp. To the left of that table, a door leading to the annexe which contained the sleeping and washing arrangements.

The fourth wall contained a fireplace, which had clearly not been used for some time, being full of dust-covered debris. Its overmantel was crowned by a mirror and held a few cards, the latest, seemingly, from last Christmas.

"Oh dear," said Mr. Piggin to himself. And again, "Oh dear."

He was convinced that the room was trying to tell him something, but its message was as difficult to read as the riddle of the Sphinx.

What was it his old instructor in secret work, the celebrated Dr. Rabagliati, had once told him?

"Look for irregularity. Something odd. Something missing. Something out of place."

The only irregularity, if you could so describe it, was the fact that the heap of scattered papers was a great deal thicker on three sides of the room than on the fourth, or fireplace side. Was that, perhaps, because the illumination, which would have helped a searcher, was more satisfactory on those three sides, coming from the two large table lamps, one on the shelf and the other on the table? Smedley, who had turned both of them on, had left them alight.

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There was a third lamp on the mantel shelf over the fireplace. Smedley had not turned this one on. When Mr. Piggin tried the switch, the reason became evident. The lamp was not working.

Was the bulb possibly defunct?

Mr. Piggin exchanged it with one of the bulbs from lamp number two. There it had worked perfectly. But lamp number three remained obstinately dark.

"Something odd, something missing."

Feeling that he might be getting warm, he unplugged the third lamp, took off the shade, laid it on the table, and set about examining it.

When he had it stripped down, it became clear why it was offering no illumination. One of its interior wires had been disengaged from its socket, and folded carefully back.

It was at this interesting moment that Captain Smedley reappeared. He looked curiously at what Mr. Piggin was doing, and said, "I don't know what you're up to, but I've got some news for you. I found Letitia—she's a widow, a Mrs. Lovejoy—and she produced some useful stuff. She couldn't tell me much about Mr. Dines—except that he was a darling man, and was clearly the object of her affections. But when she got onto Monica—'that woman,' as she called her—then she really let herself go! She gave me some succulent details of Monica's last few exploits, before she spotted old Edward Freudinger and got her hooks into him. Unfortunately, when my informant reached this point she diverted into a string of biblical quotations, bearing on what was due to happen to a wicked woman in her next life. She promised me several further chapters on this interesting topic, but I felt it was time to leave, and I slid out. I wanted to find out if you'd had any luck here."

"Up to the point where you came in, I'd have said nothing much. But it's just possible that I may have got onto something."

"Something to do with that lamp you're disembowelling?"

"Indeed. I was wondering why this was the only lamp that had been made inoperative. You can see the way the interior wire has been disconnected and folded back. Quite deliberate."

Captain Smedley was not looking at the lamp, but at the shade that Mr. Piggin had removed and placed on the table.

"Odd sort of affair," he said. "Not parchment like the other two. Strong white paper, folded and stitched. Lend me your knife."

He cut the stitches carefully, unrolled the shade, and smoothed the paper out on the table. Then he turned it over.

The outside had been white and plain. The inside was lime green in colour and contained typed words arranged in boxes. More interesting even than the typing was a circular red seal which could be seen now that the paper was reversed. The lion

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and the unicorn of the royal arms filled the circle. Round it they read the words "The General Register Office—England."

After examining the seal with growing interest, they turned their attention to the typescript, faded, but still easily readable. As they studied it, a number of matters that had been hidden before became clear to them. The document was a certified copy of an entry in the Marriage Register. The parties were Gregory Dines and Monica Marian Lewin, and it was dated almost exactly twenty years previously.

"Do you mean to tell us," said Tara, "that Mr. Dines had been married to Monica for twenty years, and had said nothing about it?"

Mr. Piggin said, "The picture is, indeed, a curious one. We must assume that as a young man Gregory Dines was attractive to the other sex. Letitia Lovejoy certainly found him so. Had she not been swept off her feet by the fiery Mr. Lovejoy, she would, she assured me, have married him herself. However, it cannot have been long before Monica, who was pursuing a relentless course of seducing anyone in trousers who crossed her path, found a husband a tiresome and unwanted incumbrance. The trouble was that she had no grounds for divorcing him and he had no incentive to divorce her. So she removed him from the scene quite simply by buying him off. By that time she could well afford it. Provided he kept his mouth shut, she would pay him a modest annuity. At that time he represented no particular danger to her. If anyone did happen to discover that she had a husband tucked away, they might have been sorry for the little man, or they might have laughed at him. Nothing more. But when it became plain to her that she could only secure Edward Freudinger's money by actually marrying him, *then* the situation was totally changed. Then it became essential to Monica's plans—and, indeed to her continued well being—to get rid of him."

"She did her best," said Bracknell. "Where did her assistants come from?"

"Almost certainly from her last boyfriend, Syd Coleman. Or that's what Scratton thinks. She was, you see, in a cleft stick. Either she had to give up all thought of marrying Edward and securing a share of his money, or she had to take the highly risky step of going through a form of marriage with him, with a husband of her own still in existence. No doubt she was counting, cold-bloodedly, on Edward's imminent death. When she could grab her entitlement and get out of the country with it before the truth came to light."

Bracknell said, "To São Paulo, you mean. To join her mother."

"Certainly. No extradition treaty with Brazil. Once she was safely there we could whistle for a return of the money. But the

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embarrassing existence of Mr. Dines was fatal to her in another way. If he came to light, it rendered her purported marriage to Edward a nullity. And being a nullity, *it would not be effective to cancel Edward's existing will."*

The partners considered the position. The ripples caused by little Mr. Dines seemed to spread even wider. Hugo said, "Then if Edward didn't, in fact, die intestate, everything that you and Jocelynne did when you thought you were administering his estate will have to be undone."

"Certainly. There is now only one person responsible for dealing with Edward's estate and that is myself, as executor appointed by his will." And to Mr. Piggin, "You agree?"

"I've been thinking about it ever since that marriage certificate came to light. You will have to see how far you can cancel what you have done. Preferably without invoking the assistance of the court. Will that be possible?"

Fearne said, "Contracts for the sale of Edward's house have been agreed, but not actually exchanged. I'm sure the purchaser will accept a new contract with me as executor. Apart from that, there is only the matter of certain small sales that have been made for cash. No need to disturb them. The cash is still in hand."

"And no distributions have been made?"

"Not a penny. Fortunate that the matter should have been handled in such a careful and unhurried way. And what are you grinning about, Tara?"

"Just a thought," said his daughter dutifully.

"The first step now will be to obtain probate of the will. Then to organise the four shares for the children."

Bob said, "So Monica gets nothing."

"Poor vulture," said Tara.

"On the contrary, lucky vulture. True, she still faces a possible charge of conspiring to murder Gregory Dines. Coleman's thugs, if and when Scratton catches up to them, may try to incriminate her but I doubt if they can make it stick. All in all, I'd say that we've come well out of a situation that might have been embarrassing."

Tara said, "Is that your only reason for looking so happy, Dad? Isn't there another reason?"

"Another reason?"

"Now that the will is reestablished, you get your South American bird books, don't you?"

"So I do," said Fearne. "I'd quite forgotten." ●

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Art by Allen Davis

The Problem of the Yellow Wallpaper

by Edward D. Hoch

Much as I hated to see Mary Best depart from my office to become a Navy nurse in that glowering November of 1940, I was delighted when my former nurse April moved back to Northmont. Her husband had been called up for eighteen months of reserve duty, and she arrived on the train from Maine with her four-year-old son Sam in tow, looking not a day older than I remembered her. It would be the beginning of two of the most eventful years of my life. (Old Dr. Sam Hawthorne paused to wipe something from his eye before continuing his narrative, and his guest might not have been mistaken if he thought it was a tear.)

April had been a plump, jolly woman of thirty when I hired her shortly after my arrival in Northmont. Now, in her late forties, she was a happily married woman and the mother of a wonderful little boy. Perhaps I was predisposed to like him, since Sam Mulhone

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had been named after me, but a few minutes of playing with the boy at the station had made us fast friends.

"It's good to have you back, April," I told her, and meant it.

"You're sure I'm not putting someone else out of a job?"

"Far from it!" I assured her. "With Mary gone off to the Navy, I really needed somebody in the office. It was good of her to make the arrangements with you."

April nodded. "The Navy took Mary and my André at virtually the same time." She hung on to young Sam's hand as I guided them to the parking lot where my Buick waited. She smiled when she saw it. "A nice car, Sam, but I can remember your Pierce-Arrow Runabout."

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper" features importantly in Ed Hoch's new Dr. Sam Hawthorne story. Readers who wish to read it can find it reprinted in the March 1967 issue of *EQMM*. It also appears in numerous modern anthologies, notably *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*, edited by Joyce Carol Oates. ¶

"I was younger then." I opened the trunk and hoisted her bags inside.

"Weren't we all!" She helped Sam into the front seat and then slid in herself while I got behind the wheel. She'd rented a nice apartment only a few blocks from my office at the hospital, and I drove her there from the station.

I'd made arrangements for a dependable neighborhood woman to look after Sam while April worked, with the understanding that she could bring him to the office any day the woman wasn't available. April hadn't wanted to make the long drive from Maine with her son, so a friend was bringing her car down the following week, with more of her clothing and possessions.

I helped her get settled and then invited her to my house for Thanksgiving dinner the following day. "You and your son can't be alone on the holiday," I reasoned.

"Oh, Sam, we had our Thanksgiving last week!" We'd had two years of confusion and anger over the holiday, ever since President Roosevelt changed the date to the third Thursday in November instead of the fourth.

I merely smiled. "Well, I guess you could celebrate both days. A lot of people in Northmont do."

So April and young Sam had a second Thanksgiving dinner before she plunged into the daily chores of the office. After dinner that night, while her son slept on the sofa in my living room, she said, "Fill me in on what's been going on. I know you and Mary were quite close for a time."

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"We were," I answered with a sigh. "It was one of those things that reached a point where neither of us wanted to take the next step. I hope that's not why she joined the Navy, but it might have been a factor."

"Is there anyone else now?"

I smiled at the question. "We have a woman veterinarian with a new place outside of town, over toward Shinn Corners. Her name is Annabel Christie and she calls the clinic Annabel's Ark. We've become friendly, that's all."

"And how's the crime rate? Are you still saving Sheriff Lens's hide on a regular basis?"

"Oh, the sheriff is a good man. He'll be happy to see you back. I still help him a little when I can."

"You're much too modest, Sam. You always have been. How about our patients? Anything unusual?"

"A Dutchman named Peter Haas claims he has a crazy wife. There's no one in town who can treat her but he won't send her away. I'm going over there tomorrow morning. You may want to ride along."

"How crazy? Does he keep her locked in the attic?"

"As a matter of fact, he does."

Peter Haas and his wife had come to America from Paris in search of a better life. They'd been fearful of Hitler's rise and what it might portend for the future of Europe. Haas had been in the diamond business, and I assumed it was the profits from those past dealings that enabled him to live with his wife in one of our town's largest homes, a lavish three-story Victorian house dating from the turn of the century, complete with kitchen and servants' quarters in the basement and a small carriage house out back. They lived there alone, though a maid came in to clean and cook for them.

Haas himself met us at the door that Friday morning, the day following our traditional Thanksgiving. He was a tall, slender man with thinning hair who wore metal-rimmed eyeglasses that he often removed as he spoke. I knew from his medical record that he was fourty-four years old. His wife Katherine was twenty-nine but appeared older. I'd started treating her for nervous depression about a year earlier and her condition had grown steadily worse with time. I detected a slight hysterical tendency and urged him to seek help in Boston, where practicing psychiatrists were readily available.

Today, as I introduced him to April, he seemed especially distraught. "She's been peeling off the wallpaper in her room. I don't know what I'm going to do, Dr. Hawthorne."

"Let's go take a look."

He led us up two flights of stairs to the third-floor room that had been her bedchamber since early October when he had twice found

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her running nude through the garden at night. "Katherine," he called out as he unlocked the door, "Dr. Hawthorne's here to see you."

"Come in!" she sang out, almost too cheerfully.

We entered the bedroom and I felt that I was seeing it, for the first time, through April's eyes. The big double bed sat with its head against the far wall, between two barred windows that looked out on the rear garden and the carriage house. To our right were two more windows facing toward the center of town. These also were barred. One window was open a bit for fresh air, and all were covered by window screens to keep out summer insects. The wall to our left was blank, covered, as were the other walls, with faded yellow wallpaper of an unattractive flowery design. It had been ripped away in places and left dangling from the wall, exposing the bare plaster. The only other pieces of furniture in the room were a nightstand, a straight-backed chair, and a wardrobe.

Katherine Haas sat upright in the center of her bed, wearing a pink negligee tied in a bow at her throat. It was the sort of garment a young woman might wear, and it contrasted sharply with the lined and haggard face above it. There was little doubt that she was ill. "I've been waiting for you, Doctor," she told me at once. "I have a whole new set of symptoms to tell you about."

"Let me give you an examination first." I took out my stethoscope and listened to her heart and lungs. They seemed fine, and her temperature was normal. We talked for a few minutes while I introduced April, then I said, "Suppose you tell me what the trouble is."

"Mainly it's the dreams, Doctor. They come on me every night, closer to nightmares than anything else. I dream there's a prisoner in these walls, inside the wallpaper, trying to claw her way out."

"Is that how it got torn?" I asked.

"I suppose so. I can't remember clearly."

We chatted a while longer and I wrote out a new prescription, more to comfort her than to do any real good. Once outside, I watched Peter Haas locking the door and asked, "Is that really necessary? Keeping her locked up only makes matters worse."

"You didn't have to chase her through the garden in the middle of the night," he replied bluntly. "I did."

"Then take her to Boston, for God's sake!" I urged. "I can give you the name of a fine man there."

"I believe she can recover better here," Haas said, running a nervous hand through his thinning hair.

"How? Locked in an attic room?"

April spoke up for the first time. "Mr. Haas, why are there bars on her windows?"

He sighed, seeming thankful for a question he could answer. "I

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understand the room was once a nursery, and later a playroom for small children. The owner had the latest safety devices for summoning servants in case of an emergency, and the bars were to keep the children from climbing onto the roof."

"I see."

The full import of her question suddenly became clear to him. "Did you think I had the bars installed?"

"I just wondered about it," April said. "The room seems like a jail cell."

The Dutchman turned to me with anger in his eyes. "Does this woman mean to insult me?"

I tried to soothe him. "Of course not. We're both concerned about your wife, that's all. She needs the sort of treatment I can't give her."

By the time we'd reached the door he'd calmed down a bit. "When will you be back, Doctor?"

"Tuesday morning, to see if that new prescription is doing any good."

Back in the car, I had to listen to April's views on the subject. "Sam, you can't allow that poor woman to suffer another day like that. It's like—it's like a story I read once. I might have it in one of the books I brought along."

I shook my head as I drove back to the office. "I'm at my wits' end," I admitted.

"Is there anyone in Boston who'd be willing to come here to examine her?"

Suddenly I remembered an old classmate of mine who'd become a psychiatrist. Doug Foley. I'd visited him a few years back on one of my infrequent holidays. "There is somebody, but he's in New York."

"Could he come up on a weekend?"

I thought about it. Like me, Doug Foley thrived on a challenge. He just might be willing to make the trip. "I can ask him," I decided.

I reached Doug in New York later that afternoon and he agreed to take the train up to Stamford the following Saturday morning, assuming there wasn't an early-December snowstorm. I would meet him at the station for the two-hour drive to Northmont. He'd stay overnight with me and return to New York on Sunday afternoon. Meanwhile, April had a suggestion.

"She's alone too much in that room. No wonder she's starting to imagine things about the wallpaper. Do you think we could get her a pet, perhaps a cat? They're soothing for people."

"It's an idea," I agreed.

I had invited Annabel Christie to dine with me that evening at the Northmont Inn. The old Ferry House was long gone, and this was now our only claim to a real country inn. As with most people, our conversation turned first to the war news. It had been a bad

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month for England, with the city of Coventry all but wiped out by German bombers. A naval battle between British and Italian warships was raging off Sardinia in the Mediterranean, but it was too soon to know the outcome.

Annabel looked especially fetching that evening, wearing a light brown dress that went well with her blond hair and hazel eyes. It was hard to believe I'd known her only about ten weeks, having met her when unusual circumstances arose at her veterinary hospital, Annabel's Ark.* Over dinner I told her about Katherine Haas and her problems. "My nurse April wonders if having a pet cat might help her. Do you have any strays at the Ark right now?"

"I have a perfect little kitten, only a few weeks old. She was born at the Ark and the owners gave her to me as partial payment on their bill. I call her Furball, but that can be changed. She's mostly black with white paws."

"Do you think it would help?"

She shrugged. "It might."

"I feel sorry for her husband."

Annabel scoffed. "Any man who would keep his wife locked up like that deserves a horsewhipping, not sympathy."

"My friend Doug will be here next weekend. I'm hoping he'll have some suggestions."

I picked up the kitten on Monday morning and drove over to the Haas's house alone while April settled in at my office. Katherine was in her locked third-floor bedroom and seemed little different from the previous week. When I presented her with the black and white kitten she seemed genuinely pleased. "It's yours," I told her. "You can name it whatever you want."

"How can I thank you, Dr. Hawthorne? This is one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me."

"You can thank me by getting better. Have you been taking your medicine?"

She glanced over at her husband, who stood near the door. "I have. I think it's helping me."

"How about the dreams?"

"N-No, I haven't been having them the last few nights."

It seemed to me that more of the yellow wallpaper had been torn and scratched away since my Friday visit. We left Katherine playing with her kitten on the bed and went back downstairs. "She's been at the wallpaper again," I observed.

He nodded with a sigh. "She denies it. She insists there's a woman behind the wallpaper, trying to get free. She must be having the same dream, even though she won't admit it."

I rested a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I have a friend, a

* "The Problem of Annabel's Ark," *EQMM*, March, 2000.

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classmate from medical school, who has a psychiatric practice in New York City. He's visiting me next weekend and I'd like him to see Katherine. He might be able to help her."

He hesitated a moment before agreeing. "Very well, if you really believe it might help."

"I'll telephone you on Saturday after my friend arrives. His name is Dr. Doug Foley."

The first week in December was a busy one for Northmont's hospital and medical staff. The beginning of the month, often accompanied by plunging temperatures and snow, seemed to signal the onslaught of all manner of colds and flu each year. Though the polio season was pretty much past, there were plenty of other worries for nervous parents. In a week as busy as that, April and I gave little thought to Peter Haas and his wife.

It wasn't until Friday, the afternoon before Doug Foley's arrival, that April remembered the story she'd been going to show me, in a twenty-year-old anthology entitled *Great Modern American Stories,* edited by the author William Dean Howells. It was a horror story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, about a situation very similar to that of Katherine Haas.

"What a ghastly tale," I said when I'd finished reading it. "I only hope we can save Mrs. Haas from a fate like that."

"The part about the barred windows and the wallpaper is what reminded me of it. I feel as if the story has come to life right here in Northmont."

"It is an odd coincidence," I admitted. "Can I borrow this book until tomorrow? I'd like Annabel to read it."

I let Annabel read it after dinner that evening, but her reaction was quite different from April's and mine. She closed the book and set it down. "You read this as a pure horror story?"

"Isn't it?"

"Sam, it's a story about feminine consciousness, about a woman imprisoned by male authority. The woman she imagines trapped in the wallpaper design is the nameless narrator herself. Her husband treats her like a child and is unresponsive to her needs. She suffers some natural depression following the birth of their baby, and he treats her in the worst possible manner."

I could see what she meant, and perhaps she was right. "You shouldn't be wasting your time on animals," I told her, only half in jest.

Saturday morning was cold and sunny as I drove down to Stamford to meet Doug Foley's train. We were both still in our early forties, though I could detect a slight graying of his hair since the last time we'd gotten together. When I mentioned it, he laughed and said, "It's good for business. People don't like to reveal their

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innermost secrets to a callow youth. Every time I notice a few more grey hairs I increase my hourly rate."

"What do you think about the war?" I asked as we drove. "My office nurse just joined the Navy."

"We'll be in it," he predicted. "Maybe within a year. But you and I are both over forty. The draft doesn't want us. Now tell me about this patient of yours."

"I'll show you my file on her at the office. Katherine Haas, age twenty-nine, although she looks older. She and her husband moved to Northmont from Paris a few years ago when Hitler first started threatening the rest of Europe. They bought the largest Victorian mansion in town, but appeared very little in public. I started treating her for mild depression about a year ago, but her condition has worsened. After a couple of episodes of her running naked through the garden at night, her husband confined her to a third-floor room with barred windows. Almost from the beginning, I recommended he seek psychiatric help for her in Boston, but he wouldn't hear of it. I don't know how he'll react to your visit, but at least he's agreed to let you see her."

Doug shifted uncomfortably in his seat. It was a long ride after an hour already spent on the train from Grand Central. "Unfortunately, we're still viewed by many people as something akin to witch doctors. Freud and Jung aren't exactly the Mayo brothers."

"I do appreciate your coming all this distance, Doug. Naturally I'll compensate you for your time."

Foley waved away the offer. "It's good to get out in the country sometimes. In Manhattan, we get too many patients unhinged by the sheer pace of things. They simply can't cope with life in a metropolis." He glanced out the car window at the barren fields spotted here and there with a trace of snow. "I don't expect that's a problem up here."

Although my office was only open half-days on Saturday and April could have gone home at noon, she was still rearranging files when we arrived. "I'm waiting for my friend Ellen to arrive with my car and more of my things," she explained. "I'll be going shortly."

"I thought Mary's filing system was pretty good," I said, observing the stack of folders on her desk.

"It was, Sam, but everyone does things differently. I learned a lot managing our hotel with André."

I explained to Doug that April's husband had been called to active duty with the naval reserve and the three of us fell into conversation until her friend pulled into the parking lot with her car. After they went off, I located Katherine Haas's folder in the stack and showed it to Doug. He read it over twice with a grim, intense expression on his face. "I think we'd better go over there now," he decided.

"Don't you want lunch first?"

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"It can wait."

On the way over he asked me about April. "She was a great help when I first came here to set up a practice," I told him. "She's different now, with her own way of doing things, but that's probably good. I'm lucky to have her back, even if it's only for eighteen months."

"The way the war in Europe is developing, her husband might be away a lot longer than that."

I hoped for April's sake he was wrong about that.

Peter Haas met us at the front door of his house and ushered us inside. "Pleased to meet you, Dr. Foley," he said after I'd made the introductions. "I'm afraid my wife is having a bad day."

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

He led us through the hall to the stairs, and I caught a glimpse of their maid dusting the parlor. "She won't let me come in, claims she'll hide in the wallpaper if I open the door."

At the third-floor room I knocked softly. "Katherine, are you in there?"

"Go away!" she said from the other side of the locked door. "Don't come in here."

"This is Dr. Hawthorne, Katherine."

"I know who it is. Go away." Her voice was low, but close by.

"A friend of mine is here from New York. I think he can be a big help to you."

"No!" she almost screamed it. "He'll lock me away!"

"Aren't you locked away now?" I tried to reason with her through the door. "Dr. Foley can help you."

"The wallpaper—" Her sentence was cut short by a sort of gasp.

I turned to her husband. "There's no reasoning with her. You'll have to unlock the door."

Haas took a deep breath and fitted the key into the lock. As soon as I heard the bolt slide free, I turned the knob and opened the door. I saw at once that even more of the yellow wallpaper had been peeled away. It hung in great hunks from the plaster walls.

The room appeared to be empty and I quickly looked behind the door as Haas and Doug Foley entered. "She must be under the bed," Haas said.

But she wasn't. She wasn't anywhere. The black and white kitten sat on the center of the quilt, the only living thing in the room.

I opened the wardrobe, which contained only one dress and a nightgown. I walked around the room, tapping the solid plaster walls. I tried the windows, but the bars and screen held firm.

Then, looking back at the wall opposite the windows, I noticed something that sent a chill down my spine. It was the blurred face of Katherine Haas, staring out at me from her wallpaper prison.

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"Looks to me like it was painted with some sort of watercolors," Sheriff Lens said as he examined the face on the wallpaper an hour later. I'd summoned him at once, after determining that Katherine Haas had indeed vanished from that locked and barred room. "Was your wife a painter, Mr. Haas?"

"Not in a good many years. When we first met, back in Paris, she used to do watercolors along the Seine."

While we'd waited for the sheriff's arrival, Doug and I had been over every possibility. We'd searched the house from top to bottom, paying special attention to the third-floor storage rooms, but we'd found nothing. Katherine Haas had faded away as if she'd never existed.

Going over her room with me, Doug could only shake his head in frustration. "She had nothing here! No personal possessions, no books, no cosmetics, not even a mirror!" He turned angrily on the woman's husband, who stood watching us from the doorway. "Did you even allow her to go to the toilet?"

"Of course. I took her downstairs several times a day. She ate her meals with me. I just could not trust her out of my sight unless she was locked in here."

"And now where is she?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "In another world, perhaps. I hope it's a better world for her."

He gave the same answer to Sheriff Lens, and the sheriff wasn't any more satisfied than Doug Foley had been. "Did you kill your wife, Mr. Haas?"

"What? Of course not! How could I? These two gentlemen have been with me every minute."

"I mean before," the sheriff said, glancing over at me. "That voice Doc heard could have been a recording or something."

But I objected to that possibility. "She spoke directly to me through the door," I pointed out. "She answered what I said. We carried on a brief conversation."

We went back to searching the room. We poked and prodded the bed, pulling it away from the wall. We searched the wardrobe for a hidden compartment and pulled that out from the wall, too, but there was nothing. Sheriff Lens had a new suggestion. After establishing just where we were standing in the hall while I conversed with Katherine through the door, he asked, "Mr. Haas, is there any chance you're a ventriloquist?"

"Of course not!"

I had to agree. "It was his wife's voice. I'd stake my life on it. She was in this room and now she's gone."

We went downstairs to the parlor, where Sheriff Lens was clearly uncomfortable with the Victorian bric-a-brac. After run-

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ning his finger over a silver tea service, I saw him wipe away the dust with a sour expression. "What about the maid?" he asked. "I caught a glimpse of her arriving."

"She must be down in the servants' quarters," Haas replied. He walked over to the wall and called out, "Rose, can you come up here for a minute?"

I couldn't catch her reply, but when the young maid presented herself I realized it was Rose West, daughter of a local hardware dealer, who'd graduated from high school the previous June. "How are you, Rose?" I greeted her. "I didn't know you worked here."

"Hello, Dr. Hawthorne. I'm trying to earn money toward college. I'm at my dad's store mornings and I come here from two to six to clean and help prepare dinner." She glanced from me to Sheriff Lens and finally to Peter Haas. "What is it? Has something happened to Mrs. Haas?"

"She's disappeared," her employer told her. "Katherine is gone and we can't find any trace of her."

Rose's mouth dropped open. "I hope she hasn't hurt herself."

"We don't know," Sheriff Lens said. "Did you see anything when you arrived, anything unusual?"

She shook her head. "Everything was the same. I saw nothing of Mrs. Haas."

"Did you ever visit her in her third-floor room?"

"Sometimes when she wouldn't come down for dinner I'd take it up to her. Mr. Haas came along to unlock the door."

"What can you do, Sheriff?" I asked him. "This whole situation is beyond belief."

He could only shrug. "Nothing, Doc. I can't see that any crime has been committed."

"The woman is gone!"

"A missing person. She probably squeezed between those bars on the windows."

"They're only five inches apart, Sheriff," I pointed out. "And they're covered with window screens."

"Let's wait a day. My guess is she'll turn up, none the worse for wear."

As we were leaving, Haas said, "You'd better take the kitten. There's no one to care for it now."

Driving back to my house, I could only apologize to Doug. "Looks like I got you all the way up here for nothing."

"Don't worry. It was a good excuse to get away from the city."

Annabel Christie insisted on preparing dinner for us both, and we spent a pleasant evening at her apartment. I tried to return the kitten, but she thought I should keep it. "You can call him Watson," she suggested. Later, when she mentioned the story about the yellow wallpaper, Doug insisted on reading it.

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"Well?" she asked when he'd finished. "Is it a story about insanity or the subjugation of women?"

He could sense there'd been some disagreement about it. Wisely, he answered, "Both, I think."

The following day at the railroad station we shook hands. "Keep me informed of developments," he said. "I can make another trip up here if necessary."

"Thanks, Doug."

"And Sam—"

"Yes?"

"Annabel Christie is a fine young woman."

Monday passed, and then Tuesday, without any sign of the vanished Katherine Haas. When I phoned Rose West she told me that Peter Haas seemed remote and preoccupied on her daily visits. He ate very little, and even suggested he might be leaving town in the near future.

The news from Sheriff Lens was a bit more interesting, even if it seemed to contribute nothing toward solving the mystery. He'd been looking into Katherine Haas's background before she and her husband arrived in Northmont and had discovered some interesting facts. "It was her father, not her husband, who'd been the diamond merchant in Europe," he told me on the phone. "When he died, fourteen years ago, the family money was left in trust for her until she turned thirty. Checks from a Swiss bank are deposited to her account on the first of each month."

"So her money has been supporting them both," I said, thinking out loud. "That's interesting. What happens to the trust fund if she dies before turning thirty?"

"The whole thing goes to a convent of nuns in Spain. No wonder he kept her a virtual prisoner. He was afraid she'd run off."

"Perhaps." But suddenly I was thinking of another possibility. "How much will she receive on her thirtieth birthday?"

"Those Swiss banks won't release information like that, but you can be sure they wouldn't handle it unless it was a sizable sum."

"Thanks for the information, Sheriff. Any word on her yet?"

"Not a thing. I've sent a missing persons report out to police departments and sheriff's offices throughout New England and New York."

"I doubt if that'll do any good. I don't think she ever left that house."

"Then where is she, Doc?"

"I wish I knew."

April had finally gotten the files arranged to her liking, and when I hung up she had a raft of questions to ask me. One was about Katherine Haas. "What are these papers in French that

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were in her folder?"

"Her medical records. She brought them with her when they moved here from Paris. My French isn't very good, but it didn't really matter. She was in good health at the time."

She studied the top sheet. "André taught me French when we were first married. I can read most of this." Then, "Didn't you tell me she painted a picture of herself on the wall of that room?"

"Apparently. Haas said she used to do watercolors along the Seine when they lived in Paris."

"That's odd. Look at this." She was pointing to a French word in the second paragraph: *daltonien.*

I shook my head. "What does it mean?"

"Color-blind."

"Oh?"

"Certainly it's not impossible for a color-blind person to be a painter, but you don't find too many of them. Did she ever mention it to you?"

"No. And until recently she seemed in perfect health."

But I thought about it the rest of the afternoon. I thought about how Katherine Haas could have gotten out of that room, and where she might be. Finally, that evening, I phoned Sheriff Lens.

"I'm going to see Haas. Do you want to come along and make an arrest?" I asked.

"Haas killed his wife, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"I knew it! I'll pick you up."

I didn't tell him anything else on the short ride back to the Victorian house. We parked a few houses down the street and went the rest of the way on foot, not up to the big house but around back toward the carriage house. I was guessing now, but I could think of no other possibility. The door was unlocked and we entered quietly. I could hear voices from the second floor. As we started up the steps a squeaky tread signaled our arrival.

In an instant Peter Haas appeared at the top of the stairs, holding a revolver. "Who's there?" he asked.

"Sam Hawthorne and Sheriff Lens, Peter. You'd better put down the gun."

Someone else had appeared behind him in the doorway and I saw that it was the missing woman. Her hand was to her mouth in alarm.

Sheriff Lens turned to me. "I thought you said he killed his wife, Doc."

"I believe he did. This woman is not Katherine Haas."

Perhaps my words were a charm of some sort, or perhaps Haas simply realized that it was all over. He lowered the revolver and turned

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back into the room as we followed. It was the woman we'd known as Katherine Haas who asked the question. "How did you know?"

We followed them into the little upstairs room and Sheriff Lens took the gun from Haas's hand. "I didn't at first," I admitted. "I went about it the wrong way, concentrating on how you got out of that room instead of the real question, which was *why*. The sheriff and my nurse April supplied me with some key facts about that. The sheriff told me that Katherine Haas had a trust fund until she reached the age of thirty. You'd both been living off that fund for years. Then April was filing some old medical records and found one from France that said Katherine Haas was color-blind. It's unusual but not impossible for a color-blind person to be a painter. That got me thinking about the self-portrait she'd painted on the wallpaper. What did she paint it with? There were no paints or brushes found in that room, no cosmetics, not even a mirror. It would be quite a trick for a color-blind artist without paints or a mirror to create a self-portrait of her face. And there were other things, too. This woman seemed older than Katherine's stated twenty-nine years. And the whole business of that locked and barred room with the torn wallpaper seemed inspired by a fifty-year-old short story."

Sheriff Lens was growing impatient. "Whatever her real identity, Doc, how could she have gotten out of that room? And why would they bother with such trickery?"

"I'll answer your second question first, because the *why* is the key to the whole thing. If we assume Haas killed the real Katherine before coming to America, it clarifies what followed. She was receiving a large monthly check from a trust fund, so it was important to him that the checks continue to arrive. It had to appear that she was still alive. It wasn't too difficult to forge her endorsement on the checks. He must have had plenty of samples of her signature. And by moving to America he avoided contact with family and friends who knew the real Katherine. But there was a problem on the horizon—the real Katherine's thirtieth birthday was approaching. The Swiss bank would require proof positive of her identity, possibly fingerprints, before surrendering the trust fund's principal to her. Haas hoped the supposed mental problem would be a way to delay her appearance, but then I insisted on bringing Dr. Foley up to examine her and they knew that wouldn't work. Katherine had to disappear until they had time to work out their next move. Nothing else would do. If they faked her death the trust fund would automatically go to those Spanish nuns."

"Why couldn't he just have her run away?" the sheriff wanted to know.

I glanced in Haas's direction. He was standing with his eyes tightly shut, as if refusing to grasp the reality of the moment. "She

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couldn't remain missing forever or he'd be suspected of killing her. It would be a repeat of Paris, where he had to leave the country and come here with a new Katherine Haas. This way they concocted a mystery, possibly even a supernatural event, to give themselves time."

"How?" Sheriff Lens asked again.

"When Doug and I arrived at that third-floor door, she was already gone from the room."

"But you talked to her through the door!"

"Big old houses with servants' quarters had to have a way of summoning the servants when needed. Most used a bellpull, but some had a system of speaking tubes like you see on ships. You told us the family had safety devices to summon servants if there was an emergency with the children, and I imagine this was one of them. The speaking tube was right inside the door, and by speaking loudly into it our Katherine's voice sounded as if it was on the other side of the door. We should have known the house had such a system because we saw Haas use it to summon his maid Saturday. We just didn't realize what he was doing when he walked over to the wall and called her."

"But why didn't we see this speaking tube when we searched that room?"

"That was the real reason why more wallpaper had been peeled off and hung in strips. One of those strips was hiding the speaking tube and we never noticed it."

The false Katherine spoke again. "How did you know all this? What did we do wrong?"

"Besides that suspicious painting on the wall, only one thing. When I arrived on Saturday with Doug Foley I glimpsed a maid dusting the parlor. But it wasn't Rose West, whom I recognized later, because the sheriff saw her arrive about two, her usual time. And I noticed the parlor was still quite dusty. You were lurking downstairs, dressed as a maid, until we were in position for you to use the speaking tube. Then you hurried off to hide in this carriage house, which is why Doug and I found no one when we searched the house before the sheriff and the real maid arrived."

The authorities held Peter Haas and the false Katherine while the Swiss bank and the Paris police were notified. But Paris had fallen to the Germans six months earlier and no one there showed any interest in the case. Haas insisted the real Katherine had died accidentally and there was no way to prove otherwise. They were released and quickly left town, though we heard later that the Swiss bank had hired detectives to track them down and recover the payments from the trust fund.

I kept the kitten, Watson, because it reminded me of Annabel. ●

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War Rations

by Martin Edwards

Martin Edwards is a man of many talents. A solicitor in the north of England, he has recently co-authored a textbook on the law of equal opportunities at work. He also writes a series of mystery novels featuring lawyer sleuth Harry Devlin, edits anthologies for the CWA, and has recently begun work on a non-series legal thriller. †

One of the children was screaming. Amy Jessop scanned the crowd of youngsters, but she could guess who was making all the fuss. For most of the others, this was the most exciting day of their lives. It was seven o'clock on a bright September morning and they were being evacuated from their homes in Leeds, heading for safety before war broke out. They were laughing, giggling, pulling faces, and playing games outside the school gates. But Tom Harker always had to be different. Today he wasn't the centre of attention and he did not like that one little bit.

She hurried along the pavement to comfort the boy, only to find that a couple of the older girls already had their arms around the skinny six-year-old. With his blond curls and blue eyes, he never seemed to be short of people to cuddle him. Rather like his mother, Amy said to herself.

"He's heartbroken, Miss Jessop," one of the girls said.

"Come on, Tom. The trams will be here any minute. No one else is crying. Your mother would expect you to be brave."

The tear-stained face turned towards her. "I want my mummy!"

"You'll see her soon. I promise." Amy crossed her fingers behind her back. Elsie Harker had, so far as she could tell, always resented the burdens of motherhood. Now Elsie would have the chance to spend even more time with that fancy man of hers. What on earth had John Harker ever seen in her? He was a decent, respectable man who kept one of the shops on the little parade. Elsie came from the vast estate behind the parade which housed people who had once lived in the endless rows of back-to-backs in the centre of Leeds. She was the youngest of a family of ten; none of her brothers and sisters had ever done a hand's turn in their lives, so far as Amy could tell.

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Tom muffled a sob. Amy gazed at the blond curls and eyes that, although puffy, still were beautiful. On second thoughts, it was all too easy to understand why John Harker had been smitten. Elsie Cornforth had, so Amy understood from Mary Brough, who also taught the infants, found herself a job behind John's counter when he was short-staffed. Within a short time, she'd also found herself pregnant and of course John had done the decent thing. That sort of man did. Amy sighed. More fool him, for walking into the trap.

A cheer went up. "Miss! The tram's coming!" the girl said, letting go of Tom.

Although close on a thousand children and staff were waiting to travel to their unknown destination, they all crammed into a dozen of the double-decker trams. At City Square, everyone had to get out at the station and pile into the waiting trains. It was a complicated journey, with innumerable stops and, when they had reached the North Riding, another transfer, this time to a fleet of buses. Amy did not have a moment to herself; the children kept plying her with innumerable questions. She had few answers for them and concentrated on vague words of reassurance. At least the endless distractions saved her from having to speculate about what the future might hold.

At about midday they arrived in Helmsley. Amy knew it as a pretty market town with a large square and the ruins of an old castle. She and her parents had come here for days out in her own schooldays in the early thirties. Today, though, it had lost its charm. By now the children were tired of travelling, and Tom Harker was not the only one who could not stop snivelling, but they had to march to the local school, along streets lined with onlookers.

"Poor mites!" she heard a woman say. "They'll never see their homes again!"

Everyone was fed corned beef and given a brown-paper carrier bag containing two days' rations: evaporated milk in a tin, cocoa, a few biscuits, more corned beef. Then it was time to assemble in the yard and divide into groups before the final stage of the journey. She and Mary were in charge of a couple of dozen small children, including Tom. Another bus took them out to a village called Coldkirby, where once again they gathered in the playground, waiting to be told where they would spend the night. A worried-looking man told them that there seemed to have been some mistake. The villagers had been expecting to take no more than half a dozen evacuees. It was evening before all the children were found a bed. The two teachers slept the night on rough made-up beds in the school hall.

The next day, a Saturday, was spent getting organised. A farmer's wife offered Amy a poky room with a window which commanded a view of the pigsty. That afternoon she wrote a letter to her widowed mother, who lived in Wakefield, to explain where she had finished

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up. "This place is pretty enough," she wrote, "but I bet in winter it's like the back of beyond. The sooner we are allowed home, the better. I could very easily get bored with corned beef! Perhaps even now it isn't too late. War may still not be inevitable."

In less than twenty-four hours, she knew better. She was with the farmer and his family, clustering around the wireless, when the prime minister announced that a state of war existed with Germany. There was a sick feeling in her stomach. So many people, she knew, would die senselessly. No one could tell what the future might hold. Amy resolved that she would return to Leeds as soon as she could. It might be less safe there, but she needed to be in a place where she felt she belonged. In a moment of self-awareness, she thought: That's what I need, somewhere to belong. And, who knows, perhaps someone to belong to.

Others felt much the same. Parents started to arrive to collect their children and take them back home. After three or four weeks, she and Mary only had a handful of pupils to look after. It was agreed that Amy should return to the city. When she got back, the schools were closed, but she was given a series of jobs. Useful work to help the war effort. She checked census forms and wrote out identity cards and ration books. Although some of the schools soon reopened, Amy's was being used as a temporary barracks for newly called-up soldiers and so she helped out elsewhere until it was ready again.

She'd returned to her digs with Mrs. Garbutt in Ephraim Street, and one day, on her way home, she bumped into John Harker. He was just shutting up shop, and in response to his greeting she asked how Tom was.

"All right, I think. I went up there a fortnight back. They seem to be looking after him, as far as I can judge. I miss him, of course, but he's in the safest place."

After that she often stopped and spoke to him. At first they would just pass the time of day for a few minutes, discussing the previous night's air raid and the people they knew who had been killed in the bombings. John was just too old for the call-up and she sensed that he felt it keenly that he was unable to fight for king and country. He was a pleasant man, muscular but kind and soft-spoken. Gradually their conversation began to range more widely. He told her a little about his business, of how he had grown up in the seaside resort of Scarborough before his parents had moved to Leeds twenty-five years earlier. She told him about her own past, school in Ossett and teacher training here at Beckett Park. She'd always loved children; teaching was all she had ever wanted to do. Increasingly, though, she felt as if she were just marking time, that there must be more to life than this.

"What about boyfriends?" he asked. "I bet you're not short of

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admirers."

She blushed and shook her head. She'd never considered herself pretty: she had a nice enough face, she thought, but her appearance was compromised by a tendency to put on weight if she so much as looked at a good meal. She liked her food too much, that was the trouble. The young men who had taken her out on dates had been amusing enough for a short time, but soon the attractions of their company had palled. They seemed somehow callow, immature, embarrassingly incapable of taking their eyes away from her ample bosom. Of course, the war had taken them away from home, and although the city was full of soldiers, Amy had resisted their wolf whistles and cheery invitations to the pub. When John Harker pressed her, she said something of this. His response startled her.

"You know, Amy, if I were a few years younger, I'd ask you out myself."

Again she felt herself colouring. "But . . . you . . ." she stammered.

"What, Amy?"

"I mean, you're married."

"She's left me, Amy. Run off with that chap of hers."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know."

She felt foolish, embarrassed, wholly unsure of herself. He bent his head closer to hers and she wondered whether he was about to kiss her. The thought alarmed her, but she realised that it excited her, too. When he simply said, "I haven't gone around shouting it from the rooftops," she felt a rush of sympathy for him.

"No, no. Of course not."

"Look, would you like to have a drink with me this evening? We could walk over to Beeston, if you like. People won't know us there."

He was sensitive enough to realise how much that mattered, she thought. If they turned up together at the local pub, tongues would soon start wagging.

"That would be lovely."

"Seven-thirty, then?"

"I'll meet you here, if you like."

"All right, but I make it a condition that I walk you home afterwards. You don't want to be hanging round these streets on your own in the blackout."

The evening they spent together was the most enjoyable Amy had known since war broke out. John proved to be an agreeable companion, but when they said their farewells outside Mrs. Garbutt's, he became hesitant again. After a brief pause, he gave her a peck on the cheek and asked if she would mind seeing him the following day.

"Mind? Of course not. I'd love to."

His craggy features lightened. His surprise and gratification were flattering, for during the past few hours, Amy had been appraising

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him quietly and deciding that, despite the age gap between them, he was really rather a handsome man. No Flash Harry, far from it, but strong and possessing, she felt sure, hidden depths. The grey touches in his hair simply added to his distinction. She realised that she would be counting the hours before their next date.

As the days and weeks passed, their relationship—she soon began to think of it as a relationship—deepened, even though John always behaved like a perfect gentleman. He wasn't one for dancing, but then neither was she. Once or twice they went to see a film and sometimes to a pub. More often, she would go over to his house after he had shut up shop and they would spend the evening together, just talking. He always cooked the evening meal; he really was very domesticated and steaks were his speciality. Running a shop was hard work, but there were compensations: It was usually possible to supplement basic rations. Neither he nor she had any time for the spivs who ran black-market rackets, but making the most of the chance of something a bit special to eat was rather different.

She gladly allowed him to kiss her at the end of an evening, but she didn't want to rush things. For the first time in her life she had found someone whom she could, she told herself, depend upon in an uncertain and dangerous world. From odd things he let slip in conversation, she guessed that he bitterly regretted having let himself be swept off his feet by Elsie Cornforth. Much good had it done him, being dazzled by her brassy good looks.

He never talked at length about his wife, and Amy could understand why. She suspected that the marriage had been unhappy once the first infatuation had worn off. John must have realised the mistake he had made and Elsie would soon have become bored with such a sober, respectable husband. He had a certain dogged Yorkshireman's pride and must have felt humiliated by her desertion. Perhaps in the long run he would see it as a blessing in disguise. Yet Amy couldn't help being curious. He'd never mentioned the possibility of divorce. She wondered what he intended to do. Was it possible that he had lost all faith in the institution of marriage, that his motto was once bitten, twice shy? If so, did that matter?

Every now and then she asked after Tommy, but John's answers were monosyllabic. She did not doubt that he cared for the boy, but his attitude seemed dutiful rather than devoted. He had made occasional visits to Coldkirby since the evacuation, but they were few and far between. Perhaps there were understandable reasons for that: the boy's physical appearance and willful temperament must have been constant reminders of Elsie. All the same, it struck her as odd, for she was sure that John Harker was, beneath his surface reserve, a man of intense feeling.

One evening, on their way back to Mrs. Garbutt's, she was emboldened by an extra glass of port and lemon to ask if Elsie

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kept in touch with the boy. John paused in mid-stride. It was as if he were trying to choose his words with special care, knowing that a few drinks had dulled his judgment.

"Well—no, she doesn't."

"It's so sad."

"She was no good," he said roughly.

"Do you ever hear from her?"

"No, I don't."

They were turning into Ephraim Street. Amy knew that he would like to change the subject, but she could not let it go. "And she walked out on you—just like that?"

"Aye."

"It must have been just after the evacuation."

"Day after you and the other teachers took the kids off," he said grudgingly.

"She seized her chance as soon as her child was off her hands," Amy said, half to herself. It wasn't unknown. At school she'd heard several tales of parents who had not seen their children since their evacuation. Some of them hadn't even bothered to keep in touch. One couple had moved over the Pennines to somewhere in Lancashire, and according to gossip, their three youngsters, housed with a retired couple in Bawtry, did not have the faintest idea they'd gone. The old woman at Coldkirby who had prophesied that the evacuees would not see their homes again might not have been so far off the mark after all.

"Don't worry about Elsie," he said. "She's not worth it."

"But it's so unfair! She's left you with all the responsibility for the child. But Tommy is hers as much as yours."

"More than that," he said grimly.

Now it was her turn to hesitate. "What do you mean?"

He sighed and faced her on the pavement. "You might as well know the truth. The evening she left, she told me that I wasn't Tommy's father."

"What?"

"It's the truth, I'm afraid. I'd suspected as much from the outset, but like an idiot I chose to believe what I wanted to believe. She owned up whilst she was telling me that she was off to make a new life with her fancy man, some travelling salesman who owned a car. Apparently she knew she was pregnant when she started giving me the glad eye. Needless to say, I fell for it. Then she broke the news that I'd got her pregnant and asked what I was going to do about it. The father was some lad off the estate who'd never have kept Elsie in the style she wanted to become accustomed to."

Amy gripped his arm. "You poor dear."

"I've treated the boy as my own for six years. I couldn't abandon him. I make sure he's all right, you can count on that."

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"I know," she said. Shock was beginning to turn to anger, hatred almost, directed at the long-gone Elsie. "And that bloody woman never goes near him?"

He cleared his throat and said gruffly, "For a while after she'd gone, I was in a daze. Mortified. No, worse than that. It was a kind of madness, I reckon. When folk asked where she was, I said she'd gone to look after Tommy. A lot of mothers did, I knew that. But I suppose plenty of people started putting two and two together ages ago. The fact her fancy man disappeared at the same time made it easy for them to see through what I was saying. I don't encourage questions, but now when they do ask, I admit that she's run out on me. I've decided it's the best thing."

"And where is she now, have you any idea?"

He shrugged. "I don't think about that. It's over between her and me. I have to get on with my own life. Let's face it, I'm no spring chicken. Moping's a waste of precious time."

She touched his hand. "You're very brave."

He coloured. "I don't see it like that. But you've helped, Amy. You've really helped me put the past behind me."

"I'd like to keep on helping."

"I'd like that too."

They paused, not knowing what to say next. She looked into his eyes and realised that he was making up his mind about her. The next moment, she was in his arms. Some time later they were interrupted by the sound of Mrs. Garbutt's front door opening.

"Are you going to be carrying on out there all night, Amy Jessop? Have you any idea what time it is?"

She pulled away from John. "Sorry, Mrs. G. I'll come in now."

The landlady stared. "And you, John Harker. A married man! You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

He stood his ground. "My wife's left me, Mrs. Garbutt. As far as I'm concerned, it's as if I'm divorced."

"And what if your Elsie turns up again, like a bad penny?"

"She won't. We'll not be seeing her or her boyfriend again, I'm sure of that."

Mrs. Garbutt sniffed. "A right carry-on!"

"Don't worry, we won't be embarrassing you again after tonight," he said. "Amy's coming to live with me. Aren't you, Amy?"

His sudden boldness stunned her. It was as much as she could do to gasp her agreement. Mrs. Garbutt tossed her head and went back inside.

He shook his head. "Sorry, love. I shouldn't have startled you like that. You don't have to move in, you know. I realise it might look bad, you being a teacher and all."

"I don't care!" she said. "As long as I can be with you . . ."

He considered her for a moment. She was acutely conscious of

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his eye settling on the ample curves of her figure, but somehow it did not displease her. "That's settled, then. How long will it take you to pack your things? Ten minutes, maybe? I'll wait out here, then we'll walk back to my place."

She went inside and raced up the stairs. Her mind was whirling. She was barely conscious of the sound of Mrs. Garbutt's footsteps, padding up the stairs, of the old woman's sceptical expression as she peered into the tiny back bedroom where Amy was flinging clothes into a suitcase.

"And what do you do if Elsie Harker does come running back to him? She may be a trollop, but she has a way with men. They can never resist a pretty face. He may change his mind if she begs him for a second chance."

"She won't," Amy said calmly.

"You can't be certain. Neither can he. At first he gave out she'd gone off with the rest of the evacuees. Until you came back, you who knew better because you'd been with the boy all that time. Then he changed his tune."

"If he says he's sure, he's sure," Amy replied. The jealousy of an old woman was not about to rattle her. Her life was on the point of being transformed. She did not yet know John Harker well, not as well as she yearned to—and would do. But he had said with unshakeable authority that his wife was gone forever, and that assurance was good enough.

Mrs. Garbutt grunted. "He's been downright shifty over it, if you ask me. Makes you wonder what's happened to her and that other fellow."

"I couldn't care less," Amy said brusquely. "Now, if you'll let me finish my packing, I'll be away inside ten minutes. I'm more than up to date with my rent, I think."

Mrs. Garbutt allowed herself a parting shot. "And what a come-down! A young schoolteacher, gone to live under the brush with the local butcher! A fine way to behave."

"At least I'll eat better with John than I ever have done here," Amy said sharply.

And although it was nothing more than a small bonus to a woman in love, it was perfectly true. John said he still had a few choice cuts in his cold store. He reckoned it was the finest meat he'd ever eaten, a delicacy too good to fritter away on customers, so he kept it just for the two of them. Only last night he'd said he was afraid he had acquired a taste for it. When she'd asked why it was a worry, he'd explained that it was very hard to find. But perhaps he'd have the chance to get some more, one day. After all, these were strange times: there was a war on. And he'd gazed at her generous figure with an expression that had made her feel needed. She told herself happily that he had begun to hunger for her. ●

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BY JANICE LAW

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BY CLARK HOWARD

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BY EDWARD D. HOCH

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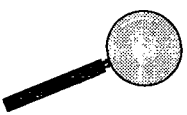

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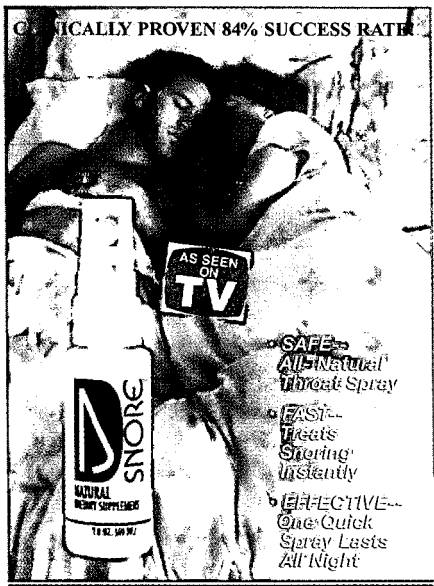
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